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THE RAID AT CRAZYHORSE

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They drove their herds to massacre range

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CROSSFIRE AT BARBED M

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Sam Harden's troubles were growing as fast as tadpoles in the spring. Only there wasn't enough water for cattle, let alone a tadpole . . . and the squatters were coming, his foreman was quitting, and his brother was being as irresponsible as a jackrabbit, as usual.

Then there were Sam's neighbors, all turning out to be double-dealers, and he was finding it out too late. That included Texas John Cooney, bringing three thousand extra cattle to that drought-burned land and its range warfare.

The townspeople tried to help, hiring some Indians to dance for water—but someone else paid the Indians more to do a war dance and some scalp-hunting.

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THE RAID AT CRAZYHORSE

by

WILLIAM VANCE

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CROSSFIRE AT BARBED M

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I

SAM HARDEN'S wide shoulders carried all the pressures of a ruinous year that fall night in 1886. What he wanted to do was get drunk and forget the whole stinking mess; the effects of the big dry were that bad. The range was brown and brittle and the streams dry. Cattle bawled for lack of water. The long dry spell had put a kink in the whole country.

But it wasn't all the fault of the weather, the events at the tail end of that disastrous year. It was, in the terms of an earlier generation, the way the stick floated. Looking back, an old-timer remarked simply, "They just had to happen. That's all."

The accidents of fate happened, as they will. All these meshed and the wheels began turning the night Sam Harden came to town, all unaware of forces working outside nature itself. He was of the Flag Hardens, big through the shoulders and chest, flat-bellied, lean-hipped, all dark of hair and eye,

and high-strung and touchy as the wild mustangs roaming the hills. The Flag spread wasn't the biggest—nor the smallest—though most admitted it was the best run in the Territory of Montana; some went so far as to say in the whole western range, from Canada to Mexico.

But despite good management, Flag was in as bad shape as the rest of the ranchers. The market was down, the range overstocked and now—this drought. The Harden boys, Sam, and Dick, as smart as they were, tasted defeat along with the rest. Observers remarked that Sam took it harder; others answered that that was because Sam was the mainspring of the operation. Dick Harden didn't much give a damn about most things.

Sam Harden, the older of the brothers, put his buckskin gelding past the crossroad corner for which the town was named and felt the wind pluck at his sheepskin-lined coat. It had shifted from the north since nightfall and the hint of moisture in it mocked the drought-stricken country.

The cottonwoods around the dark courthouse were waving wildly and throwing off their clouds of cotton when he went past. He stopped at Ketterman's Livery Barn, folding his big hands on the saddle horn, outwardly relaxed. The stableman moved out of the darkness into the dim glow cast by a lantern hung on a nail beside the door.

"Sam, hi-ya," Ora Ketterman said. "Think it'll rain?"

"All right, Ora, hi-ya," Sam answered. "Not much hope."

"I reckon. Your brother Dick. He's drunk and raisin' hell."

From down the street a wild yell split the night. "Yeeoowww! I'm a ring-tailed cattymount an' it's my night to howl!"

"That's him," Ora said. "He's been at it since right after dinner."

Since nooning, Sam thought moodily, feeling a stir of anger. He leaned forward and said, "Thanks, Ora. Guess I'll be late for the meeting."

"I wouldn't if I was you," Ora said. "Jesse Kenton's in town."

Sam thought, *Jesse Kenton can go jump in the lake.* He turned his horse in the direction of the wild yell. Kid brothers were made to be looked after, he told himself philosophically, trying to stem his rising tide of rage.

Dick, if it was he, emptied a six-shooter at the sky and another wild yell sounded out. The street was empty of people. A dark form staggered out from the shadow of the feed store and stood droop-shouldered in the street. Sam could see that his younger brother was trying to reload his pistol.

He kicked his boots out of the stirrups and slipped from his horse. "Gimme that gun, you knothead," he said.

Dick Harden swung his head uncertainly, trying to find the source of the authoritative voice. "Whosh ashking fer my gun?" he demanded in a bubbling voice. "Ain't gonna do it. Gonna shoot—" He weaved back and forth. "Ah, ha, it's good ol' big brother come for little brother."

"Listen, Dick, you better come with me. I'll get a room at the Stockman's and you can sleep it off." Sam forced himself to speak civilly when what he really wanted to do was knock his younger brother sprawling.

"Hell, no," Dick said unsteadily. "Ain't gonna do it." He fumbled with his pistol and dropped shells on the ground. "Can't find the hole. Maybe I better get one with hair around it." He giggled.

Sam took his arm and Dick shook it off. "Leave me be," he snarled.

"What got you started, Dick?"

Dick put his arms around Sam and sagged against him, laying his head on Sam's shoulder and beginning to whimper. "Didn't you hear?" he moaned. "Liz Porter killed herself this mornin'. A purty girl like that shot herself right in the head, Sam." He pushed away from Sam and tried to

reload his gun again. "That damned buddy o' your'n," he said fiercely. "I'm gonna kill 'im, Sam—"

Sam was shocked at the suicide of the prettiest girl in Crossroad Corners but that didn't stay his anger. He slapped the gun out of Dick's hand and kicked it away. All the frustration of the long, hard summer was in his rock-hard fist as he slammed it against Dick's chin. He knocked the younger man flat. Then he lifted him to his shoulder and trudged down the street to the Stockman's Hotel.

Molly McGee's pretty brown eyes widened when she saw him coming in. She didn't waste words, though, reaching for a key and heading for the stairs ahead of him. He tramped up the steps, watching the motion of her hips under the linsey-woolsey skirt and liking what he saw.

"He's been drinking all day," she said. "Ever since he heard—"

"It hit me, too," Sam said.

"But not enough to send you drinking. I'm surprised he passed out. He doesn't usually—"

"I knocked him out," Sam said.

"Oh," she said. She bent to the door, unlocked it, and threw it open.

Dick moaned as Sam placed him on the bed. He straightened. "Haven't time to undress him," he said. "Anyway, he doesn't know."

She followed him out of the room. "I'll bring him coffee when he wakes up and starts yelling," she said. She placed a soft hand on his arm. "Don't you worry about him, Sam. You've got enough to worry about."

"Thanks, Molly," he said. He went down the hallway, down the stairs and back to his patient horse still standing where he'd left him. He fisted the reins and walked toward The Mint, seeing the momentary glow of a cigarette in the alley between the Ace Bar and the courthouse.

Fill McGee's spy, he thought. He swung down the alley

that led to the back door of The Mint and tied his horse to a worn hitching post, a big, dark-moving shape against the black of night. Then he pushed open the back door of The Mint and walked down a dark corridor, toward a gush of yellow light and the hum of voices.

Sam strolled in through the open door and saw with a mild shock, despite what Ketterman had told him, that Jesse Kenton was sitting at the green-covered card table, dominating the group in the room.

"Hi-ya, Sam." Kenton nodded, his hard bright eyes cold and unfriendly. He held a copy of the *Crossroad Corner Times* in his hand. Marv Teller, Kenton's gunfighter, leaned against the wall behind his boss, his ankles crossed, his eyes dull as lead.

The others in the room were George Balfont, from Limber Creek, and Reno Milser of the Circle M, all as hard-pressed as Sam Harden.

"Where's Dick?" Balfont asked Harden.

Sam reddened and didn't answer.

Kenton's voice, colorless and without inflection, asked, "Don't you know, George?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I knew," Balfont answered testily. He was a handsome man, with bold brown eyes and prematurely gray hair.

Kenton stared at Sam Harden, his eyes narrowed under bushy, blond brows. He deliberately took out his watch; the lamplight glinted on it as he flicked the cover open. His eyes returned to Harden and he said, "I'll give him five minutes . . ."

Sam returned the stare. "Don't wait," he said in a hard, flat voice. "Dick's drunk and won't be here."

"It's his range, too," Reno Milser said petulantly. "I say—"

"Don't say it right now," Kenton said, shaking the paper, his face ugly with anger. "I want to read this juicy bit to all of you before we go into anything else." He looked

at them, first one then another, scowling darkly. He shook out the paper, cleared his throat and read in a heavy monotone: "I, the undersigned, do hereby notify the public that I claim the valley off from Crazyhorse Creek, six miles east of Crossroad Corners, to the source of the creek south of the railroad, as stock range. Signed, John Cooney, also known as Tex and Texas John Cooney." Kenton lifted his head and glared at them as though they were responsible for the published notice of preemption.

All of them stared back at him.

"There goes our winter range!" Reno Milser complained.

"It's not enforceable in any court of law," George Balfont said uncertainly.

Sam looked at him, wondering if George was thinking about Liz Porter. What went through that handsome head? But he said, "Not any more than our claim is." His voice was unchanged, hard and flat.

Jesse Kenton shifted his angry glance to Sam. "Whatever you do Sam, don't go maverick on us now."

"We don't have to worry about Sam," Balfont said quickly when he saw Sam's face redden.

Irritation washed over Kenton's face. He slammed the paper on the table. "Reno, tell Leo to bring us a bottle and glasses," he said. "We can at least have a drink to loosen us up for this damned business."

"Not for me," declared Sam Harden. "I want to be stone-cold sober when I talk about this, Jesse. What's on your mind is killing business." It didn't help to remember that Pony Keefe had been murdered not a month ago under mysterious circumstances while everyone nodded knowingly and whispered, *Kenton knows all about that,* in a dark manner.

Reno was already on his way out of the room. George Balfont said quickly, lunging out of his chair, "I'll go with you, Reno."

When they were alone, except for Marv Teller, Kenton said, confidentially, "Sam, when it comes down to cases, there's just you and me. Reno's an old man but he's sparkin' a young girl, from one of the families Fillmore McGee brought in. He's going to have his hands full, Reno is; wait and see. And George Balfont—Liz Porter killed herself today. As for Dub Porter, you know *him*.

"That leaves it all to you and me, Sam. Fighting on two sides, this Texas John on the one hand and Fill McGee on the other. It's going to take all we have to pull it through. Why, God, even without this other trouble this drought and market drop would near do us in!"

"What're you trying to tell me, Jesse?" He glanced at the silent Teller and noted that the man's eyes had lost the dull sheen usually present.

Kenton relaxed visibly and laughed shortly. "The land is kind of like a woman," he said, finally. "Only more so, Sam. Land is more than money, more than food for a hungry man, more than a woman to a raunchy, horny trail hand."

"Not to me," Sam said bluntly. "I saw my own father kill himself working for more and more land."

"That's what I mean," Kenton said in a kindly voice, in a manner he thought fatherly. His losses this year made him feel anything but fatherly, but he had things to do and this man standing before him seemed necessary to his plans.

"That's exactly what I mean, Sam. You don't understand. You had that big ranch handed to you and Dick on a silver platter. I knew your old daddy—"

"And he knew you, Kenton," Sam said. "You got plans, count me out. I'll kill my own snakes."

"You're pushing thirty, Sam," Kenton said, dangerously quiet. "Time you started acting like a grown-up."

Sam had often had that same thought but it was different the way Kenton said it. Before he could frame a reply

Reno and Balfont came through the door. Reno carried a bottle of whiskey and George held four glasses in one hand. Reno deposited the bottle on the table and Balfont clattered the glasses beside it.

"Go ahead, Jesse," Balfont said. "Pour up."

"Tell him, George, go on, tell him," Reno said around his stump of a cigar.

These are the men, Sam thought with something akin to despair, *that the job of holding this country together falls on.*

Kenton looked up expectantly. "What's this?" he asked in a sharpened voice.

George Balfont didn't have the opportunity to tell Kenton anything. They all turned their heads automatically at the slim man who suddenly appeared in the doorway. He wore a derby over near-white hair that fell to the velvet collar of his long coat. Ruffles peeped from the cuffs of the same velvet and laced the shirt below the flowing tie. He wore a diamond stickpin and a diamond ring. His trousers were tailor-made, and fitted his legs tightly. His soft black leather boots were immaculate. Lazily, he brushed back his coat with his two thumbs and stuck them into his belt.

"George," he said in a soft, almost pleasant drawl, "I want to see you outside."

Dub Porter stared at Balfont with frosty gray eyes and unsmilingly waited for an answer.

Balfont's throat worked as he attempted a smile. "This is not the time, Dub," he said huskily. "I'm—I'm sorry. More than I can tell." His smile disappeared and sweat stood on his brown forehead. "This is not the time," he repeated.

Dub Porter shrugged his shoulders and dropped his hands. It seemed almost like magic the way the derringer appeared in his right hand. He raised it with a practiced movement. "All right, then," he said.

II

SAM HARDEN was standing nearest Porter. He moved like the slashing attack of a tiger. The derringer boomed in the closeness of the room and the bullet tore into the planking of the upper wall. Harden held the hand holding the two-shot pistol in an iron grip and, without stopping the motion of his body, pinned Porter against the wall.

The slim gambler didn't resist the weight and strength of the big man. Relaxed, he stared at Sam with frosty gray eyes. "There'll be another time, Sam," he said.

All the others except Balfont were talking excitedly. He was white-faced and shaking.

Teller moved in then, with his pistol raised. He aimed a smashing blow at Porter's head. Sam moved and took part of the brunt of the blow on his shoulder. At the same time he kicked out. Teller fell to the floor with a strangled cry, writhing in agony, his hands clasped between his legs.

"You didn't have to do that, Sam!" Jesse Kenton yelled in a high-pitched, ranging voice.

Sam kicked again and the pistol Teller had dropped skittered across the room and bumped against the wall. He twisted the derringer out of Porter's long slim fingers and dropped in in the side pocket of his coat. He pushed and shoved Porter to the door.

"You'd better get out of here, Dub," he said, and shoved the gambler, a push that propelled him a half dozen feet down the hall.

Dub Porter turned slowly, unruffled, shot his cuffs and straightened his coat. "I'll kill him sooner or later," he said and then he turned away, striding toward the noise of the outer room.

Leo Maury, owner of The Mint bustled back. "Heard a shot," he said. "What—"

"Go on, Leo," Kenton barked. "Nothin' happened. Gun went off, that's all. Nobody hurt."

Leo looked at all of them and turned away, not saying a word. The men in the room represented a large portion of the trade he enjoyed and he wasn't about to question them.

Kenton turned back into the room. Teller was seated at the table, his face sick but his eyes blazing with hatred as he looked at Sam Harden.

Jesse Kenton repeated, "You didn't have to do that, Sam."

"No, I didn't," Sam agreed. "But I always did hate to see a man hit when he couldn't protect himself."

"We'll never come to any agreement," Kenton said, and strangely he seemed uncertain of himself. "If we can't get together on something we'll be up the creek without a paddle."

"What'd you have in mind, Jesse?" Sam asked.

"Why, to keep this Texas hombre out for one thing," Kenton said in a puzzled voice. "We ain't got grass for our own, let alone for some dust buster's cows."

"And how was you aimin' to keep him out?"

"We all act together," Kenton said. "We pool all our men. We ride out there and turn him back. He don't turn back—" He looked at Sam with hard eyes.

"I'm getting out of here," Balfont said in a shaky voice.

"Me too," Reno said, "soon's I finish this here cigar and get another drink."

Balfont didn't look at them as he hurried out of the room with his head down.

"What's spookin' him?" Kenton asked, "Dub or what I said?" He hit the table with his fist. "We'll all go under if it's every man for himself. We'll never make it, I'm warnin' you, Sam."

Sam didn't answer but turned out of the room to follow Balfont. Outside, in the night, Sam's horse whickered softly.

Balfont stood there beside the horse, his head down. He straightened and turned to face Sam. "Thanks for knocking up that gun," he said. "He'd of got me sure at that range." His voice choked down. "As if I wasn't already all broke up. About Liz."

"It was her choice, George," Sam said. "Why don't you try to forget it?"

"She was sick," Balfont said haltingly. "She was sick in her mind, Sam. Trouble was, I knew it and couldn't do anything about it."

"The talk that's going around is that you got her in trouble, George. And then dropped her." It was hard for him to say it.

"That's a damn lie," Balfont snapped. "We were good friends, Sam, and that's all! Liz hated the life she had to live. She hated having Dub Porter for a father. And she hated this crappy town with a passion."

"Dub thinks different," Sam answered. "He'll try again."

"I know." Balfont's voice was tinged with agony. "He'll try again and all I can do is protect myself." He went close to Sam. "You didn't see it, Sam, because you were busy with Porter. Marv Teller got his gun and was going to shoot you in the back. Kenton stopped him, took his gun away from him."

"Maybe I owe Kenton something," Sam said wryly, not liking the thought.

"He didn't do it for you," Balfont retorted.

"Kenton's meeting blew up right in his face," Sam said,

not knowing if he was pleased or not. "Wait a minute, George." He called out as Balfont moved away.

"What?" he asked, turning.

"What was the news you and Reno were about to tell when Porter walked in?"

"Oh, that? Just that Tex Cooney and a couple of his trail hands are in The Mint. Looking for Kenton—or you."

Sam whistled. "Wonder how far out his herd is," he mused. "Wonder where he ever heard of this valley he's claiming."

"I believe Fill McGee told him," Balfont said.

"Why would an old-time cattleman like Fill do something like that?"

"Can't say for sure but I have an idea," Balfont said without hesitation. "Fill has had a couple of lawyers back in Washington working to have the Crow Reservation opened up for some homesteading. Everybody knows he hasn't got a chance, and I think Fill has finally given up on it, too. His plan now is to get the ranchers hereabouts fighting among themselves. When the smoke lifts he'll move his kinfolk, or whoever those people are, in on our range." Even in the darkness he sensed Sam's doubt and added hurriedly, "He has the law behind him, Sam. We've no more right to the land we're using than that bunch of settlers out there."

"Don't I know it," Sam said gloomily. "But I can't see Fillmore McGee going to all that trouble—"

"Here's the clincher, Sam. The postmaster told me Fill wrote somebody down in Texas. I didn't think of it until this Cooney showed." He was silent and then said in a tired voice, "I'm going home, Sam."

He walked out of the alley, caught up by a hopeless rush of emotion, stemming from Liz Porter's death by her own hand. *It's all such a waste,* he thought, as he untied his horse from the rail and mounted. He had no desire to return to the lonely ranch on Limber Creek, but what else could he do? He turned his horse away from the light,

laughter and music of The Mint and rode out of town.

Sam watched him from the mouth of the alley and then led his own horse to the Stockman's Hotel down the street. He tied the animal, crossed the walk and mounted the steps, then pushed open the door to the hotel lobby.

Molly McGee came to meet him. "He's still sleeping, Sam. I think he's settled for the night. And maybe tomorrow. He'll have a head big as a watermelon in the morning."

"Good," Sam said. "I hope he's sick as a dog."

She laughed. "You don't mean that, Sam."

"Yes, I do. He's never been anything but a headache for me. He has one of his own coming."

"How did the meeting go?" she asked.

He thought about what Balfont had told him. Molly was McGee's daughter, his flesh and blood. Anything she learned she'd pass on to Fill. "Not much of a meeting," he said carelessly. "It sort of broke up when Dub Porter tried to shoot George."

Molly gasped and then said indignantly: "And his own daughter not even buried yet!"

"I hadn't thought of it like that," Sam confessed, shook by Molly's sudden ire. She was usually as calm as a summer breeze.

"Dub Porter's failed as a father. He won't be responsible for what happened. He wants someone else to take the blame."

A slim girl in a black dress came down the stairs. Sam recognized her as the Keefe girl who sang in The Mint. Her brother, he remembered, had been killed in a homestead shack on Kenton's land. He watched her as she hurried out of the hotel.

"I didn't know she lived here," he said.

"She doesn't," Molly said tartly. "She's visiting a—a sick friend."

Sam chuckled quietly.

"Oh, Sam!" Molly said with quiet reproach.

"Look, Molly, do you know a cattleman named Cooney from Texas?" He didn't really expect an answer and was surprised when she nodded.

"He's a friend of Paw's," she said. "They met at an association convention back in St. Louis years and years ago and they've always wrote back and forth a couple of times a year."

"Did you know Cooney was settling in Crazyhorse?" Sam asked.

She laughed uncertainly. "My, you sound riled. Of course I know. Fill told him to stay put, that the range was burned out. But you know a cattleman. You can't tell 'em a thing."

Sam shook his head and turned away. She called after him, "Clay's in town and looking for you."

Sam stopped short and swung around. He'd sent his foreman to Canada to learn about leasing conditions up there. Clay had been gone nearly two weeks. "Where is he now?"

She said, "He came in, making the rounds. I told him about the meeting in the back room of The Mint. You'll probably find him somewhere along the street, Sam."

Sam left the hotel and walked hurriedly to The Mint. He stood there just inside the door, blinking in the smoke and shutting his ears to the hum of voices and the noises of a saloon gambling hell. Three strangers stood by the pianola, evidently waiting for Eddie Dulin to show. The girl in black stood at the other end of the instrument, also waiting.

Sam went to the end of the bar and looked at the faces lined up and down the length of it. He didn't see Clay Bassett there. He stepped back and saw the foreman enter. He motioned to him and Clay headed his way, showing evidence of hard travel in his dusty clothing and unshaven face.

"What'll it be, Sam?" Leo Maury, owner of The Mint

stopped before them. Leo personally served only important customers.

"Leave a bottle, Leo," Clay said, "I'm sure dry." To Sam he said, "I been lookin' for you, Boss."

"What luck, Clay?" Sam asked impatiently as Clay poured himself a drink and downed it, almost in one motion. He poured another and filled Sam's glass.

"You ain't gonna like this, Boss," he said, "but that range up in Alberta is worse than our'n. They'll let us winter for fifty cents a head but what the hell. They'll die off up there same as here."

"I feel like getting good and drunk," Sam said.

"Me, too."

A tall, thin, red-headed man pulled away from the group at the pianola and headed across the room. Somehow, Sam Harden knew this man was Texas John Cooney. He watched him thrust his way through the crowd until he stood before him. Cooney pushed his hat on the back of his head and drawled, "Mr. Kenton?"

Sam shook his head, noting that the other two men with Cooney had drifted in behind him. "I'm Sam Harden. I don't know where Kenton is."

"Maybe you'll do," the thin red head stated. He was any age over forty and his clothing was good but trail stained. He had a scraggly red moustache that drooped down around a square, hard chin. His hands holding his cowhide vest were big-boned, spatulate. "I'm Tex Cooney and I just trailed three thousand head up from Texas."

Sam stared, his question unspoken but implicit in his eyes and stance. *More cows to cover a range already hopelessly overgrazed,* he thought.

Cooney didn't move for a moment and then he leaned forward, his drawl more pronounced. "Started out with six thousand. Lost half. Had one hell of a time gettin' to where

I'm holdin' 'em. Now I hear I'm squattin' if I move where I aim to."

"Crazyhorse has always been winter range for all the spreads around here," Sam said.

"Then nobody claims it?"

"I didn't say that. Every rancher hereabouts has a stake in that valley, Mr. Cooney. Not that it's such a hell of a place right now, all the grass being burned out this year. No rain. Not much snow last winter."

Cooney nodded. "Don't I know it. Hull durn country's burnin' up."

"You lost half your herd and that's bad. The ranchers around here stand to lose about eighty-five per cent, Mr. Cooney, unless a miracle happens. I haven't ever seen one and I'm 29 years old."

A broad, dark man moved up beside Cooney and surveyed Sam Harden with hot eyes. "Y' wastin' your time, Tex," he said, and spat in the sawdust at Harden's feet. "What we should ought t'do is—"

"Hold it now, Brad," Cooney said and took a step over, a step that put him between Harden and the dark cowboy. "Ain't gonna have no trouble if'n I can he'p it."

"I'd advise you to sell and go back to Texas," Sam said bluntly.

"For less'n ten dollars a head?" Cooney wagged his head slowly from side to side. "Then I would be out o' business. Can't do that, son."

"There's nothing here for you," Sam Harden said, and brushed past Cooney and headed for the door. Clay Bassett followed slowly.

"That fella will move in," Clay said when they were outside on the boardwalk.

"He hasn't any other place to move," Sam said in a tired voice. He liked Texas John Cooney and felt sorry for him.

The man had come a long way to find more trouble than he left behind him.

"He takes the Crazyhorse, where'll we be?"

"How the hell should I know? I'm going home."

"I'll stay in town if you don't mind, Sam. Got a lot to catch up on."

Sam said, "All right, Clay," and mounted his horse. He rode out into the night, alone, with a little feeling of envy for Bassett, for his carefree life. He went past the cattle pens, sitting easy in the saddle, and heard the fretful bawling of range cattle waiting to be loaded in railroad cars and hauled east to a depressed market. He wondered if everyone in the United States had suddenly quit eating beef. All the local ranchers were selling off, even cattle not ready for market, and this glut reflected in the low price of beef. Sam felt constricted, hemmed in, cut off. And suddenly he was sick of it. He asked himself if what Kenton said was true; that if he'd earned the land he'd feel more possessive about it.

What's the matter with me? he wondered. *Am I getting soft in the head? I got a tiger by the tail and can't let loose.* He had a feeling that he was standing alone, that his brother Dick was a spectator, hurrahing the tiger on.

He heard the even rhythmic pound of a running horse behind him and perversely pulled off the road into a clump of jackpine. The dryness of the year had sapped the resin smell and he sat his horse, waiting.

It was Clay Bassett on his cob of a roan, running the animal hard. Sam waited, smelling the dust that drifted out. He put his horse down the wagon track, watching Clay circle the few tents in the grove. On impulse he followed the roan's dust, around a clump of trees, and saw that Clay disappeared into the old barn of the spread that Fillmore McGee had run at one time.

Sam left his horse a distance of a pistol shot from the barn

and walked forward until he reached the side of the barn. The sound of voices came to him easily.

"Been waitin' long?" he heard Bassett ask with a peculiar sound to his voice.

The soft sound coming from the darkness was laughter, woman's merriment, with a touch of wildness. Her voice said, "I never wait for a man."

"You're waitin' now," Clay said.

How long has he known her? Sam wondered. These people had been here since early summer, waiting for—what? He was surprised Clay hadn't mentioned knowing one of the girls. He shrugged in the darkness and listened without self-consciousness as Clay said, "Well, you are, ain't you?"

"I mean until now. I never was courted by a cowboy. I've always been sparked by farm boys." There was a silence and then she went on, "I've seen you ride by, kind of nice like the cowboys ride. Farmers don't ride like that."

"Farmers, cowboys, drivers—they're all people."

"My pop doesn't think so. He says cowboys are wild."

"Shoot, they're people, too. Spend a lot of time in the brush and get all lonesome, and then come to town and let off steam. That's why people think they're wild."

"You never farmed, did you, Clay?"

"Nope. Cows are my business."

"Did you ever feel like—well, maybe you'd like to farm?"

"Maybe it's somethin' to study on," he said cautiously. "A cowboy—well, I don't know how to say it, the life is uncertain. Cows take a lot of watchin' after. . . ." He stopped for a long running moment and then went on. "Growin' things out of the ground must kind of give root to a man. Maybe the growin' does it."

It was the longest speech Sam had ever heard Clay make. He felt a sense of shame all at once as he listened to the softened sound of voices, now indistinct. And other sounds.

They were kissing, Sam suddenly realized, with a queer feeling of loneliness.

Another long silence, then, "Reckon your pop might find a quarter section for me?"

Sam held his breath. Her answer was a soft, satisfied laugh. Sam turned away, heading for his horse. He had a feeling almost of betrayal. He caught up his reins and stiffened, immobilized, at the sound behind him. Turning his head he saw the dark shape of a man standing there, holding a shotgun. The hammers clicked back.

"Don't move, mister," a steely voice warned. "Just raise your hands and walk toward them trees over there."

III

As HE approached the cottonwood grove, walking carefully, Sam could see several fires. The man behind him with the shotgun said, "There's a little creek there so watch it."

"I know about it," Sam said. He moved slowly, feeling his way, though he could see fairly well. The shotgun nudged his back.

"Don't get no funny notions, mister. I mean it."

"I wasn't about to," Sam said, and stepped across the creek which had no water; it was only a dry bed like most of the streams these days.

Nearing the fire he could see three men, sitting on upended blocks of wood. They stood up as Sam approached. He counted six wagons scattered through the grove. Beyond,

but not far enough away to kill the smell, were a pair of mules, a yoke of oxen, horses and a scattering of milch cows. Sam decided they must have brought their hay with them, seeing a small stack in the center of the rope corral.

Sam hauled up short at the fire, surprised as a tall bearded man stepped toward him. He stared hard at Fillmore McGee. His eyes shifted beyond and he saw McGee's black buggy horse hitched to the dusty buggy.

"I found him prowlin' around the old barn," the man with the shotgun said. The other two men stared at Harden without emotion. One of them sat down again.

"All right, Bert," McGee said, "Good work. Now, go on back, son." To Sam he said, "Come on by the fire, Sam. Have a cup of coffee."

Sam shook his head and looked around. Bert was gone with his shotgun. None of these men appeared to be armed nor were they hostile that he could tell. He saw a farm woman sitting by one of the wagons, shelling peas in a pan gripped between her knees. The dry sound of the peas rattling in the pan came faintly to him.

"What do you want, Sam?" McGee asked quietly. He had a burring voice. It was said that McGee came from England as a boy. Sam didn't know. He remembered McGee as a local eccentric, a prosperous cattleman who drove his black buggy horse Charlie at a dead run all around the country.

McGee had sold out four or five years before to Kenton and Milser, the two men splitting McGee's cattle and land evenly. He then moved into town, bought the Stockman Hotel, and dealt in cattle. He also was a representative of the Chicago brokers. Beyond that, Sam knew as little of McGee as the rest of the inhabitants of the country did.

"I wasn't looking for trouble," Harden said.

"Nobody does. Sit down even if you don't want coffee." He resumed his seat on a block of wood and gazed into the fire. "Sorry about Bert bringing you in. This camp has had

trouble in the past and the good people here felt it necessary to post a guard."

Sam took a step toward the fire. "What's going on around here, Fill?" he asked quietly. "What do these people want?"

"They're looking the country over," McGee said genially. "Waiting for the Crow Reservation to be opened up for settlement. This is McWharter and Evans, Sam, two good farmers from out of Iowa, looking for a home same as the rest of them."

Sam looked at McWharter and Evans and they nodded solemnly. McWharter wiped a hand across his mouth.

"That's a pretty slim hope," Sam observed.

"Oh, I don't know. It's been done before. It'll be done again, like as not."

"Where'll the Crow go?"

McGee shrugged. "They got land to spare, Sam. All that grass up there." His black eyes glinted. "Don't you wish you had that grass for your hungry cows?"

"I don't wish for what's not mine."

"Not even to feed hungry animals? Sam, this country is in the grip of money-mad greedy men. There's steers on this range that was bought back east on borrowed money and brought out here. Speculators, that's what. There'll be heads rolling one of these good days. There'll be an accounting, boy!" McGee's voice had risen until his roar filled the night, sounding like a judge rendering a verdict of hellfire and damnation. He settled back.

"It's a bad year for anyone to be moving around," Sam said mildly.

"It's a bad year any way you put it," McGee answered. "These greedy-gut men who have more stock than they can take care of, they're the ones who'll suffer, Sam. Along with the cattle, of course. A man who has more stock than he can feed and shelter is guilty of criminal negligence." He

eyed Sam and added, "And ought to be run out of business."

"You're working yourself up to a boil," Sam said. "I can't figure what you're driving at, McGee."

"I get worked up," McGee admitted. "Can't seem to help myself. It's an inhuman business the way it's run. Time for a change."

"You made a pile out of cattle in your time," Sam said. "Now you're out of the business you turn sour on it. And there's something else, McGee. What is it?"

McGee smilingly denied it with a shake of his head. "You can hear all kinds of rumors, Sam. Some of that gossip gets back to me."

"You've not denied the rumors," Sam pointed out.

"No. People will believe what they want to believe no matter what I say."

Sam poked at the fire with the toe of his boot. "I guess I'll say good night," he said. He had a feeling of frustration, growing out of this night's activities.

This small camp, here in the grove on the edge of town, was unsettling, too. The apparent aimlessness of the people was cause for his concern. He knew they were not here without purpose. Some plan was working. In Sam Harden was a streak that couldn't abide mystery. He had to know what was going on.

"You're free to go when you will," McGee said, and there was a note of mockery in his tone.

Sam leaned his head forward. "Where'd you get the hay in that rope corral?"

McWharter, like a man eager to please, said, "We cut it up in them high meadows, Mr. Harden."

"And hauled it down," Evans added.

Sam looked at each of them, nodding. "Good night, men," he said, and turned away from the fire.

The girl was standing there, watching him; as he turned,

she came closer to the fire. Sam halted, waiting for he knew not what.

"What're you doin' runnin' around this time of night?" Evans asked in a quarrelsome voice.

The woman by the wagon spoke for the girl. "Can't keep her tied up forever, Pop. I let her go for a walk."

The girl was smiling at Sam, her head tilted. "Good evenin', Mr. Harden," she said and there was a mischievous note in her voice. "I'll bet you're surprised I know your name."

Sam touched his hat brim and bent his head. She was about twenty; the shapeless homespun she wore couldn't hide the fact that she had womanly curves.

"Go on, Hannah," Evans said in a rough voice. "He'p your ma shell them beans."

"Don't need no help, Pop," the woman called in an unruffled voice. "Hannah, get a bucket of water from the water barrel and then go on to bed. Mornin' comes early."

Hannah Evans gave Sam a tantalizing smile and darted away.

Sam again turned away and walked out into the darkness. He didn't see the guard, Bert, as he sought his horse. Clay Bassett's roan was not in front of the barn. He felt leaden-hearted at the thought that Clay was ready to sell him down the river for a section of ground. His fists clenched involuntarily. It'd probably be Flag land, a piece of Sam's own ranch.

He mounted the gelding and rode out to the wagon track and pulled rein. He sat the saddle, his hands on the horn, debating, pulled one way and then the other. At last he shook his head and lifted the reins, turning the gelding toward Crossroad Corners.

He'd at least have it out with Clay. Tonight.

The gelding stiffened under him, raised its head and

neighed. Sam stood in his stirrups as an orange flame boomed in the night and a gunshot sounded. It was as though a giant hand swept him from the saddle and down into darkness.

IV

After his fellow ranchers left the back room of The Mint, Jesse Kenton made the unpleasant discovery that his day was ruined. The monthly poker game with Doctor Sawyer, Ketterman, Sheriff Alonzo Winner and Bob Shannon, the freight line owner, had produced more winnings than usual. The biggest portion of the chips in the game was stacked in front of Kenton and that didn't lessen his angry restlessness.

The small talk had made the rounds, each man making his own contribution. The businessmen of Crossroad Corners were making a purse to pay the Indians for a rain dance. It was said that an old retired prospector knew how to make rain by shooting a cannonball into the clouds.

"What clouds?" Kenton grunted, and got no answer.

These men knew what went on in the country and he had learned from one or another tonight all the news that was worth knowing, with a greater detail of background than that contained in the newspaper.

Still, it was an evening all flat and without enjoyment; nothing had gone as he expected. He usually enjoyed these get-togethers, playing poker until midnight and then eating a steak prepared by Leo Maury himself.

Leo bustled in and stood for a moment beside the table to gather their attention. "You ready for the eats, gentlemen?" he asked.

Marv Teller wasn't there or Kenton would have refused. He looked at the others and they nodded with him. Leo withdrew with a promise to bring in steaks before a cat could lick its paws.

Kenton felt no anticipation. Mentally he cursed Sam Harden and the other ranchers for being blind, gutless, and as self-important as a dance hall girl.

Teller glided in as they were eating. He seated himself beside the door. His usually dull eyes were bright and color touched his cheeks. Kenton looked at him curiously.

"Want a steak, Marv?" he asked, wondering what Teller had been up to; he looked as though he'd just done something highly satisfying. He had his answer in the next few minutes as Fillmore McGee cautiously poked his head into the door, looked all around and then came on in, speaking to Sawyer.

"Doc, I just brought Sam Harden to town. Shot in the head. He's at the hotel."

Births and deaths were important in Crossroad Corners. There was a sudden hush and then a babble of questions. Doctor Sawyer was tapping his mouth with his napkin, pushing back from the table as McGee spoke.

"He still alive?" the doctor asked.

McGee nodded. "Don't see how, but he is, with half his head blowed off."

Sawyer spoke again as he headed for the door. "Which room?" He was a tall, handsome man, slim, with coalblack hair that was streaked with silver.

"Molly'll show you," McGee said and Sawyer hurried away.

"Guess you'll want to know the details" McGee then said to Sheriff Winner. "Sam was bushwhacked."

"Them people you got out there, McGee," Kenton said sourly, and the accusation in his voice was plain.

"Know who done it, Fill?" Winner asked.

McGee ignored Kenton. "No, Sheriff. I heard the shot but didn't pay no attention. I got Charlie, my horse, and started for town. Found Sam there on the side of the road. Wasn't for his horse, I'd of drove right by him."

"You think he'll live?" Marv Teller asked. Everybody looked at him in surprise. Marv Teller didn't usually do much talking.

Sheriff Winner struggled to his feet, shaking his head with frustration. "Can't do anything tonight," he said. "I'll be out there at first light an' have a look."

"What with that wind blowin', sign'll all be gone by mornin'," Ketterman declared.

"I'll just do the best I can," Winner said and gave them all a short nod of farewell.

"Let's get outta here, Marv," Kenton said, pushing noisily back from the table. He jammed his hat on his head and strode out the back way, with Teller following.

Outside, in the dark, he wheeled and grabbed Teller's shirt front in an iron grip. "Why'd you do it?" he raged.

"You saw him," Teller said hoarsely. "He kicked me, damn it!"

"You don't burn down a house to fry an egg," Kenton hissed. "You don't never do nothin' without tellin' me first, Marv. You ought to know that."

"This was for me," Teller said in a soft voice. "Let go my shirt, Mr. Kenton."

Kenton stepped back. "We'll have this out now," he said doggedly. "You do what I say and nothin' more, Marv. That's how it's got to be."

"All right," Teller said in an altered voice. "I guess I let myself get carried away."

"Don't let it happen again," Kenton warned. He wheeled away and went toward the hotel.

Several times during the night Sam Harden awoke and moaned with the throbbing pain of a splitting headache. He called for water and never got enough. After a bare sip or two he'd lapse into half-sleep and half-consciousness. He knew he was in the hotel, that the shadowy form of Doc Sawyer was there part of the time, but little else.

It was still dim light when he came fully to his senses. He lay for a time, hazily recalling the night before: the stab of flame, the sensation of falling, the engulfing darkness when he hit the ground. He touched his aching head. It was bandaged. The sharp odor of alcohol cut the musty room odor. The wind pawed at the building, rattling the windows.

Doc Sawyer said, "He's coming around, Molly."

Molly McGee leaned over the bed, smelling of soap and some delicate fragrance. He breathed deeply and found it pleasing despite his condition.

"How do you feel, Sam?" she asked in a soft, sympathetic voice.

He smothered a groan and said, "Awful." He tried to raise himself but relaxed quickly when a sharpened pain reduced him to a cold sweat and a sick stomach.

"Don't try to get up," she said.

"I'm not about to."

"Lie quiet, Sam," Sawyer commanded. "That .44 nearly scalped you. And the fall from the horse didn't help any." He put things into his black scuffed bag and snapped it shut. "Keep him quiet, Molly."

Sam forced himself to one elbow. "Wait, Doc. While you're here I want to ask you a question or two."

"I know nothing about the circumstances of your accident, Sam."

"No accident. Somebody tried to kill me. Anyway, the question is not about that. Molly, you leave us alone for a minute."

Molly hesitated and Sawyer nodded. "Go on, Molly. He needs fresh water anyway." She moved silently out of the room. "Well, Sam, what it it?"

Sam's face twisted in concentration. "There was something damn important . . ."

"You got no business thinking about anything," Sawyer said mildly. "Why not go to sleep and forget it?"

Sam Harden shook his head. "Yesterday was a kind of breaking point day. We're in big trouble here with our cattle and range. But worse than that are other things that can get a man in trouble.

"For instance?"

"Liz Porter killed herself. My brother got drunk and George Balfont almost took a bullet. There's more to come."

"Go on, Sam."

"You can answer me this: was Liz Porter pregnant when she killed herself?"

The doctor jerked almost imperceptibly. "You shouldn't have asked me that, Sam," Sawyer said with a sadness in his voice. He went to the washstand, poured water into a bowl and began washing his hands. He dried them and neatly put the towel in place and rolled down his sleeves. He walked to the bed and took his coat from the brass poster and slipped it on. "I can't talk about my patients. It's none of your affair."

"She's dead," Sam said.

"I can't talk about my deceased patients, either," Sawyer said.

"Then she was pregnant?"

"Sam, don't try to read people like you would trail sign."

"How else would you do it? George is my friend and Dub Porter tried to kill him. Dub will try again."

Doc Sawyer frowned. "Meaning that if Liz was pregnant you'd not try to keep George alive? You're a big man in this country, Sam, but don't try to play like you're God."

"There was a time when a man could talk to you, Doc," Sam said with a tiredness that came out in his voice. "How long will I be here while my spread falls apart?"

Sam Harden was depressed; something bad was going to happen, but he wasn't quite sure he knew what it was. The doctor settled his hat on his head and lifted his bag from a chair. "Few days ought to do it. I'll check again tomorrow."

He walked to the door, straight-backed, his feelings hurt. "People can still talk to me when it's sensible talk. If it'll make you any happier I'll tell you this Sam: Liz Porter died as she lived, a good girl as the people hereabouts use the term." With that he gave his hat a vicious tug, opened the door and walked out. He was a man who seldom lied; it gave him an uncomfortable feeling to do so now.

Molly McGee stepped in and closed the door, her eyes round with curiosity. But she asked no questions as she sat on the edge of the bed, regarding him.

"Who shot me?" he asked her.

"The sheriff would like to know the answer to that," Molly said. "Fill brought you in, in his buggy. Found you beside the trail just a short distance from the camp."

He forced himself up on one elbow. "The wind sounds like it might bring rain. Why is the light so dim?"

"No rain. It's blowing dust, Sam. If it did rain there'd be mud in the air."

"I'd settle for it. Ah, God, of all the times to get laid low . . ." He lay back on the pillow, sick at his stomach.

Her hand was cool on his forehead. "Don't fret, Sam,"

she said in a soft, comforting voice. "Just rest. Don't even think about your worries for a bit."

"That's like telling me not to breathe," he said.

"I know, I know. But worry never got people anything but gray hair and stomach trouble. Let it go, Sam. Just relax and make your mind a perfect blank."

He grinned, a stretching of the lips, and gave her a dark glance. "That's the way it usually is."

"No, Sam. There's big trouble boiling here and you're about the only one with gumption enough to head it off."

"God help us all, then," Sam said tiredly. "Where's Dick?"

"Out looking for tracks," she said. "After the bushwhacker. Clay tried to talk him out of it but he wouldn't listen."

"Not to anyone," Sam said. "Clay least of all, next to me."

She smiled and patted his cheek. "Clay's waiting downstairs. Wants to see you."

"And I want to see him," Sam said grimly and added, "Ouch!" as he unthinkingly moved.

"He can't stay long," Molly warned as she moved away. "Doctor Sawyer told me to keep you quiet and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

She left him; a short time later Clay tiptoed into the room, his hat in his hand, his lean face grave. He stood beside the bed looking lugubriously at Sam, unspeaking.

"Don't act like you're visiting a corpse," Sam said, trying to keep from growling. He felt sick and only wanted Clay to go away and let him rest but he had to get this over with. "I don't feel like forking a green bronc but that'll pass. I was out to Fill's barn last night, Clay." He stared hard at his foreman, a little sick at remembering what he'd heard.

"Aw, hell," Clay muttered, twisting his hat in his hands. He'd worked for Flag since he was sixteen and had practically grown up with the Harden boys. He felt more like a member of the family than an employee and it troubled

him that his action had put him in a bad light. "I reckon you heard me and Hannah?"

Sam nodded, wincing at the pain it brought. "I heard."

Clay knew he ought to be angry at Sam for eavesdropping but he couldn't dredge it up. "Don't put much stock in what you find out by sneakin' around, Sam."

Nettled, Sam answered, "What'm I supposed to believe?"

Clay shook his head. "You got the same kind of hungers in you I have. You yearn for a woman, you eat when you're hungry and drink when you're dry. You want things that come from hard work. So just think a little bit about me in that light if you think about me at all."

"Getting a little windy in your old age, Clay?"

Clay flushed and said nothing, twisting his hat. This angered Sam and he growled, "Well, damn it, say something."

Clay shrugged. "When a man's burnin' he'll say most anything that comes to mind."

"You telling me that I can forget what I heard out there?"

Clay shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I hate to sound like a dog, but that's about it, Sam."

Sam knew he should feel reassured but he didn't. In all the years he'd known Clay Bassett, he couldn't remember any action that would indicate culpability. He merely said, "Those farmers have been cutting hay up in the higher meadows. Move all the cattle that're able to make the trip just as quick as you can."

"Comes a sudden snow and they'll die" Clay warned.

"I know. They'll die where they are now. We got to risk it." The choices a man had to make were always between two evils, Sam thought. There never seemed to be a third and good road to take out of trouble.

"You're the boss," Clay said.

There was a sound beyond the door and a light tap on it. Molly stood framed in the doorway. "All right Clay,

time's up," she said briskly. "There's nothing so important it can't wait."

Relief washed over Clay's face. He clapped his hat on his head and mumbled, "S' long, Sam, Molly." He hurried out, glad to be gone. He found he was sweating. But as he headed for his horse he wondered if he'd see Hannah Evans if he swung by the old barn. She did keep an eye on the road and if she saw him coming . . .

V

After the interrupted meeting in the back room of The Mint, Reno Milser made a sudden decision about the farm family that had been living at the Circle M. He untied his horse, mounted, and rode out of town in a hurry after all that hard thinking. The sorrel snorted indignantly at the spur and went ahead through the dust-silvered night.

Nearly two hours later a splinter of yellow light threw out a welcome to him. He left his horse standing in front of the foreman's cabin which he'd turned over to Hobart Hurt and stamped across the porch. He knocked on the door, then lifted the latch and walked in.

A fireplace blaze lightened a circle around the hearth; the rest of the room was in dancing shadows. Hobart Hurt slouched in a rawhide bottom chair on one side of the fireplace and his fat wife sat on the other side. Judith sat on the floor between them, her legs drawn up under her chin and

her thin arms clasped around her legs. She turned her head as he came into the room.

"Draw up a cheer, Mr. Milser," Hurt said in a voice that seemed to apologize for his being alive.

"Do, do," seconded Mrs. Hurt.

Neither of them made a move as Milser went past the thin girl and thrust his hands out to the blaze. He spoke to the fire. "I reckon you know why I'm here." He looked at Judith over his shoulder. She had a plain, pinched face, touched with freckles and a flat, immature body. She raised her head, suddenly listening.

"We been wonderin' when you'd make up your mind," Hurt said.

"You and the missus—you understand? A rancher's wife doesn't have such easy work. It's hard—"

"She's fourteen—"

"Nearer fifteen," Hurt interrupted his wife.

Judith was still, intent, watching Milser closely.

Milser looked at her straightening and turning. "You want to do it, Judith?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir."

Milser backed away from the fire. "All right then, it's settled. We'll fix it for a week from Sunday." He looked at each of them, watching their agreeable nods and then he turned out of the room, relieved.

Hurt sucked his dead pipe; it made a wet, gargling sound. He took the pipe from his mouth and knocked out the dottle on the hearthstone. "That's settled," he said triumphantly. "Glad we got outta that grove. Gonna be trouble there, see if it don't."

Mrs. Hurt looked at Judith. "You're gettin' a good man, Judy. You'll be better off than me or your paw ever was. Mr. Milser's stingy but he's good."

Judith said musingly "Just think—I'll be married and have a house—and babies—an' I won't be an old maid, not ever!"

Sam Harden awoke later, alone in the room. He lay there, thinking about his ranch and the country coming apart, listening to the moan of the wind. He moved restlessly. He couldn't stay in bed and maybe get bed sores. A man owed it to himself to try to build a dam, to hold back the flood. . . . He gave a hollow laugh at his mental gymnastics. Dam, flood, and what he needed, what all of them needed, was water. Water was their salvation. Water could stop a lot of trouble that wasn't merely on the way: it was here.

He sat up in bed and waited, holding his head while the dizziness passed. The pain wasn't sharp as it had been, only a dull thumping that set his teeth on edge. When he felt stable he swung his feet to the floor and stood erect, swaying only slightly. Nauseated, he wanted to get back in bed but he fought it, telling himself, *You're not that bad hurt, stand up and soon it'll go away.* It didn't go away, but fighting against the notion of giving up seemed to strengthen him. He went to the bureau and opened the door. His clothing was more neatly arranged than he ever did it himself. He dressed slowly, not making any sudden movements. He was sitting on the floor, tugging on a boot, when the door opened.

Dick Harden slid into the room. A half inch shorter than Sam, he had that Harden thickness of chest and dark good looks. His face was shadowed with two days growth of whiskers. "How y' feelin', big brother?" he asked. "Molly said you couldn't be disturbed. And here you're fixin' to light out."

Sam watched him, narrow-eyed, then finished pulling on his boot. Dick was more than a handful when fists flew or the music twanged. When he had a snootful of red-eye he was locoed as a bull on the prod.

Likely, Sam had always figured, it was the role Dick took as younger brother, protected, spoiled and given at-

tention that made him a heedless, headstrong man as he had been a heedless, headstrong boy.

One thing was sure, when Dick got started on popskull whiskey, nobody, including God or the governor, could push him an inch. He could hold more whiskey than a fair-sized watering trough and was always trying to prove it.

Well, that had been fine as long as the ranch prospered and the problems were those that could be solved by ordinary effort. But when the whole range was burning, when hopeless struggles with nature and man-borne problems had honed collective tempers to razor sharpness, the fiddle-footed were as misplaced as an English saddle at roundup.

"Like hell," Sam said, and got to his feet, triumphant that he made it without falling on his face. "Where you been and where you going?"

The old antagonism rose in Dick's face and his black eyes flickered for a moment. He put it down with a visible effort. "I been out cutting sign on the hombre that gunned you," he said flatly. "I come back to go to Liz's funeral." He was silent and his throat worked. "I owe her that much." His voice was husky and brought an unfamiliar ache to Sam.

Sam was silent, uncomfortable, in Dick's fresh burst of grief. Dick had played with Liz Porter when they were both kids. They'd attended Mr. Gooch's one-room school in Crossroad Corners and were so inseparable that everyone thought they'd eventually get married. Something had happened somewhere along the line but their friendship had never waned.

"Well, come along home when it's over," Sam said gruffly.

"You not goin', Sam?"

Sam shook his head. "I'd fall on my face, I'm so weak and woozy," he said.

"Why don't you climb back in that bed, Sam?" Dick asked earnestly. "You'll not get anything done out at the ranch."

"I'll go clean out of my mind if I stay in that sack another minute. No, I'm on my way, Dick. And come home quick, you hear?"

"Hate to see you ride out alone," Dick said anxiously. "Maybe I better—"

"No. You stay for the funeral. I don't feel up to it, Dick. But one of us should be there."

Dick was relieved. "That we should. Soon's it's over I'll come right out, Sam." He seemed embarrassed. "I guess I'll find that room you got for me and get cleaned up." He turned and was gone.

Sam got on his other boot and went downstairs. Molly McGee looked blankly at him when he appeared before the counter. "Sam! What're you doing up?"

He leaned against the counter. "Can't stay penned any longer, Molly. I'll go crazy if I lay there another minute."

"But Sam, the doctor—"

"I'll be back in a few days and look in on him. You know I wouldn't be standing here if I wasn't able."

"I don't know! You've always been so darn stubborn. What's so important at the ranch? Clay can take care of things."

"Nothin's important. Can't you see how it is?" He hesitated and then asked, "Where's Fill?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, Sam."

"Where does he stand in all this? What does he want, Molly?"

She didn't get a chance to answer because Jesse Kenton stamped into the hotel, alone.

He stood there, looking at Sam, rolling a cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. Then he took it out and looked at it and looked at Sam again. "I'll have a few words with you, Sam." He waved the hand holding the cigar at Molly. "Private, girl. Get gone."

"This is my hotel," Molly said. "You get gone, Mr. Kenton."

After one surprised look he ignored her, talking to Sam. "We didn't get finished with our business."

"Far as I'm concerned we did," Sam answered. "I told you last night I didn't want any part of your plans. That still goes."

"You're like your old man was," Kenton said testily. "Full of high and mighty ideas. Well, you're not the man he was, Sam, and you can't bring it off by yourself. You need somebody to prop you up. I'm offering you a way out of trouble."

"Or a way into it," Sam said. He pushed himself away from the counter and almost fell. He heard Molly gasp.

"All right, then," Kenton said with finality. "You hear this, Sam, and remember it good. You're out of it. No matter what happens you stay out of the game. That way you'll not get hurt. By me, that is." He wheeled away and then turned back and added a parting shot, "Too bad that gunner didn't shoot straighter." He went out, trailing cigar smoke.

"What a horrible thing to say," Molly said, then went on, "I'm afraid of him; he's land crazy. It's an incurable disease with Jesse Kenton."

He looked at her. "Yes. He told me."

"He told you!"

Sam nodded. "Said it was like wanting food, drink, and a woman, all rolled in one, that hankering for land."

She flushed and looked down. "What would he know about love?"

There was no answer to that and Sam didn't try.

Clay Bassett turned his attention to his job after passing the grove and not seeing the girl, Hannah Evans. He rode hard, making for the flats where Squaw Creek emptied into Harden Creek. He could hear the dull booming of the two men who were dynamiting the creek bed in the faint hope of raising water that would flow below for Flag cattle.

He fanned the cob ahead faster after emerging from a

light stand of dry timber. The two men came up over the cutbank afoot and ran behind a boulder and squatted. A moment later another explosion ripped the air. Dirt and rocks flew upward. The two men stood up and turned, watching his approach.

"Hi-ya, Clay," said Abe Ferman, removing his battered hat and wiping his face with his shirt sleeve. He was a short, squat cowboy with a harelip. "We shoulda had this dynamite on Fourther July, dad burn it." He put his hat back on his head and gave it a settling tug.

"Yeah. Woulda done some good then," Ralph Osgood, a broken-nosed, gap-toothed and nearly bald man in his forties said in a whiny drawl. "We ain't raised a drop o' water."

Bassett dismounted and gave each man a sack of Bull Durham. "Here's smokin' you wanted. You just about shot up all that blastin' powder?"

Ferman nodded, rolling a cigarette. "Enough fer one more shot, Clay. We had a hell of a time keepin' them cows away from the seeps long enough to shoot."

"Blew one ol' brindle steer clean t' hell n' gone," Osgood said, licking his cigarette and placing it between his lips. He and Ferman lighted from the same match.

"Keep on and we won't have no cows to tend," Ferman said.

Osgood looked askance at Clay. "Reckon we'll be outta jobs purt' soon, Clay?"

It was obvious Ferman and Osgood had been discussing the condition of Flag. For some reason Bassett felt outraged.

"You will you don't get that last shot off," he said. "We gonna make a drive. All the cattle goes up high where there's a little grass left what ain't burnt up."

"Where's that?" Ferman asked, shaking his head. "Up in Canady?"

"No grass in Canada," Clay said shortly. "Them farmers

been cuttin' it some's up there." He waved his hand toward the mountains. "Sam said do it and it's gotta be done. Hurry now and get movin', you two."

"Just about the time we get 'em up there we'll get a hell-bustin' snow storm," Osgood said thoughtfully. "That'll take care o' Flag cows, shorely to goodness."

"Sam wants 'em moved an' that's that," Clay said flatly. "Hurry now an' let's get out o' here."

He followed Ferman and Osgood back to the cutbank. Osgood picked up six sticks of dynamite tied together in a tan bundle. He tucked it under his arm and hauled a length of fuse from his hip pocket and walked upstream until he found a damp spot. He squatted over the seep and worked the end of the fuse into a blasting cap, crimping it with his teeth. He took a nail from his pocket and made a hole in the dynamite and inserted the cap in the hole, working it in. He glanced up at Ferman. "Got a match?"

Ferman silently handed him a match.

Osgood frayed the end of the fuse and then shielded it with his body from the wind. He struck the match and held it to the frayed end of the fuse. It ignited and began sputtering.

He placed the bundle of dynamite in the middle of the seep. The three of them hurriedly left the creek bed and ran to the big rock where Bassett had first seen the two men. They squatted there and Osgood began counting slowly.

"It'll go in about a minnit," Ferman said with satisfaction.

They squatted behind the huge rock, waiting.

Suddenly, Clay stiffened. He pointed. "Riders. Comin' up the crick."

Osgood and Ferman looked at each other in dismay.

Clay leaped out and began running down the creek bank, waving his hat and shouting.

The riders stopped, looking at him. One of them drew a Winchester from a saddle boot and levered in a shell.

"Get down, get down, take cover!" Bassett yelled, motioning with his hands.

The men sat their horses, staring. Then the blast went off and dirt and rock geysered into the air. The horses reared and began bucking away. The riders had their hands full for a moment. The man with the rifle dropped it.

When Bassett reached them they had the horses gentled. It was Jesse Kenton, Marv Teller, and an Indian. Marv Teller dismounted and retrieved his saddle gun. The Indian, on a paint, looked stolidly ahead.

Kenton snapped, "What the hell's goin' on up here, Clay?"

Bassett grinned. "Tryin' to raise a little water outta the creek, Mr. Kenton."

Kenton's stony face didn't soften at Clay's smile. He turned his head and spat. "Lot of damn foolishness. Sam's idea, I reckon?"

"Well, yes," Clay said reluctantly, feeling disloyal. "He's willin' to try anythin'."

"Little good it'll do him." He surveyed Clay in a friendlier manner. "Don't see how a hard-workin', sensible fella like you stays with Flag."

Clay's friendly grin disappeared. He said softly, "It's just like home, Mr. Kenton."

Kenton gave an impatient wave of his hand. "Yeah. Home can be hell sometimes, Clay. Well, it won't hurt to make one last try. Tell Sam I got suthin' to discuss with him."

"I'll tell him, Mr. Kenton," Clay said doubtfully.

Kenton bent a hard gaze on Clay. "But you don't think he'll pay any attention?"

Clay shook his head and said hastily, "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. Well, I reckon I owe old man Harden one more try at straightenin' out his idiot sons." He tipped his head toward the silent Crow Indian. "The Crow gonna make a rain dance for us, Clay. I'm payin' them a sight o' money to make big medicine for this burnup range."

"I heard the merchants in town made up a purse," Clay said.

"Yeah, well they gettin' some o' them Pawnee to make a rain dance. What the hell does a Pawnee know about makin' rain? The Crows do."

"Well, we've tried everything else," Clay said.

"You tell Sam, by God, I want to see him and Dick," Kenton snapped.

"I'll tell him," Clay promised and watched the three ride away. Osgood and Ferman came to stand beside him and all three of them watched in moody silence until a fold of hills hid the riders from sight.

"Osgood seen a rain dance once," Ferman said. "Brought rain, too."

Clay had heard the story before. He said, "Come on, let's get on down and help the boys."

"Ain't you gonna tell Sam what Jesse Kenton said?" Ferman asked.

Clay nodded. "I'm gonna get them cows movin' first. Let's ride.

VI

Outside the hotel the wind was still blowing and a brown pall lay on the land dimming the mountains. Sam angled across the street and to Ketterman's Livery. Ketterman came out brushing wisps of hay off his shoulder. He nodded to

Sam, glanced at his bandaged head and looked at the sky in vain quest of rain clouds.

"Sam. When's it gonna rain?"

"My horse here?" Sam asked, not wanting to answer the question on everybody's mind and tongue.

"Yeah. McGee put him up here last night. I heard you nearly got it?"

"Saddle my horse, Ira. I'm going to The Mint and get something to hold me up on the way home."

"I'll do that," Ketterman said, adding, "I'll tie him to Leo's rail, Sam. You don't look much like walkin' even a little piece."

Sam turned away and again crossed the street to The Mint. There was only one horse at the rail, a gaunt, spavined gelding with collar marks on its shoulder. He nudged the batwings aside and went into the saloon. The man called McWharter leaned against the cherrywood nursing a drink. He looked woodenly at Sam.

Leo Maury stopped polishing glasses and came down to stand before Sam. "Y' feelin' better, Sam?"

"Some. Give me a drink, Leo. A double."

Leo brought the private bottle and a glass and tipped the bottle, expertly pouring until the amber liquid topped the rim. He leaned across the bar and, giving his head a slight tilt toward McWharter, said in a low voice, "He's been talkin' about Reno and it ain't good, Sam."

Sam could sense more coming and he wondered if this was fulfillment of his premonition of trouble. He waited, holding the glass in place on the counter as Leo went on, "Seems Reno's let a family from the grove move onto his place."

"That's his business," Sam said.

"Just wait'll you hear the rest of it," Leo warned. "That family's got a little gal, maybe thirteen, fourteen. Reno's gonna

marry her. She's just a kid, Sam, and the rest of these people are gettin' pretty ugly about it."

Sam tasted his drink without moving his head and placed the glass on the bar, a hopeless feeling deepening. "I'd think that would concern Reno and the girl and her family."

"Well, maybe, but they're kind of foolish, Sam, the girl's family. The way I hear it, the rest of them farmers claim they're not lettin' an old, old man marry a young gal. Not even if they have to do away with that old man. Meanin' Reno."

Sam tossed off his drink, flinching from the sharp pain that hit him as he tilted his head. He frowned and put the glass on the bar and laid the flat of his hands on each side of it. He was not aware that McWharter had moved beside him until the man spoke.

"You cattlemen stick together," he said between his teeth. "So you better carry word to Milser if he takes that little girl to wife he'll never bed her down."

Even with his own whiskey in him Sam could smell the other's drink. He glanced at McWharter, noting the wide set stare, the teeth bared, the slight tremble in the man's hands. "You're getting yourself wall-eyed for nothing," Sam observed.

McWharter jerked. "About nothin'?" He raised his voice. "We're stranded out here, nothin to eat, no place to go, some good people at the mercy of merciless men like you, who harry our camp and seduce our women, even the girl child, and you tell me not to get my dander up—" McWharter was glassy-eyed with rage. His mouth twitched in speechless rage and he tongued spittle from his lips.

Sam finished his drink, considering the man beside him.

"You've had enough to drink," Leo Maury told McWharter. "I'd recommend you take your leave, friend."

"You runnin' a public place," McWharter said defiantly. "Don't go tellin' me when I've had enough to drink. I got

words yet for this cattle baron here, this high and mighty king o' the mountain."

"You didn't make this kind of noise at camp last night," Sam said mildly.

"You gonna tell Milser to leave that pore innocent girl be?"

"That's between him and the girl—and the girl's family," Sam said, fighting the anger that threatened him. "It's got nothing to do with me."

"It's got plenty to do with you and the rest. You cattlemen're like a pack o' wolves. Lemme tell you somethin', cattle king: there's a bounty on wolves where I come from—"

Sam's patience snapped and he interrupted. "You're asking for trouble, mister. The bartender here gave you some good advice. Take it and go home."

"I'm not scairt," McWharter bragged. "You can't run me outta here, not any more'n you can run me outta the country. I got my rights. An' I can back 'em up." He slapped his belly and then snaked a hand inside his shirt.

"Look out!" Leo shouted, ducking below the bar.

Sam caught a glimpse of a gun in McWharter's hand. He brought out his own gun and slammed it across McWharter's head. The man dropped in a sodden heap, his pistol still snagged in his shirt.

Sam slid his gun back in the holster and poured himself another drink and gulped it down. He said, "Get Doc Sawyer to take a look at him, Leo." He patted his pocket, laid a thin gold coin on the bar. "This ought to pay for it." He turned and walked shakily out of The Mint, mounted his horse and turned the animal south, toward Flag.

Halfway down the street a man in a frock coat and derby hat stepped from a doorway and raised his hand. "Ho, there, Mr. Harden," Thomas P. Wheeler, editor, printer, publisher and sole owner of the *Crossroad Corners Times* called. "Could you get down and come in for a minute?"

"Afraid not," Sam answered. "I get off this horse, chances are I won't be able to get back on again."

Wheeler, a stumpy, dark-browed man with long black sideburns, pulled aside his coat and took a notebook from an inside pocket. "You want to tell me about getting shot?" he asked, poising a pencil above the pad.

"I don't know anything to tell."

Annoyance washed across Wheeler's face. "Do you have any idea who'd do a dastardly trick like that?"

Sam halted a head shake. "No."

"You think it has anything to do with Cooney bringing his cattle into this country? I hear he made threats against you in The Mint last night."

"That's not right," Sam said, his head beginning to ache. "Cooney made no threats. Not to me he didn't."

"What about the farmers in McGee's grove?"

"What about them?"

"Well, what I mean is, do you suspect one of them might have—"

"I've no reason to think so," Sam said.

"Mr. Harden, what do you predict will happen in our present travail?"

"I think the wind'll stop blowing about sundown," Sam said.

Wheeler puffed up, slowly replacing his notebook. "Is it true, Mr. Harden, that Flag will throw in with Kenton's outfit?"

"Flag's not throwing in with anyone," Sam said and lifted his hand holding the reins.

"You could do worse," Wheeler said, putting on a stubborn look. "Mr. Kenton's the only man around here big enough to cope with our problems. You should do—" He raised his head like a bird dog catching fresh scent as Doctor Sawyer, bag in hand hurried down the street and turned into The Mint. "What do you suppose happened?"

"A farmer got banged on the head," Sam said and watched the newsman scurry toward The Mint, his coattails wrapping around his legs in the stiff wind. He spoke to his horse and rode out of town, thinking, *I didn't want to hit the man, I did it because I had to. Hell's fire, you'll be doing a lot more things you don't like before this is done.* He lifted his neckerchief over his nose to keep out the dust.

Sam slowed his horse to a walk near where he'd been shot. In the dimness of the blowing dust he didn't hope to find anything, but something about the spot held him. He tried to figure just where he had been when the bullet knocked him from the saddle.

The wind had erased all sign, but something black was snagged in a clump of sage. He dismounted and walked across the dim wagon track, bent and picked it up. It was his hat, a jagged tear separating the crown from the brim on one side. *That sweatband saved my life,* he thought.

He leaned in the lee of his horse, rolled a cigarette, and managed to get it lighted despite the wind. A dark shape loomed out of a nearby gully. The big buckskin of Sheriff Alonzo Winner whickered a greeting to which Sam's horse answered.

Winner got stiffly down and pulled the red and white bandanna from over his mouth and nose. He got another just like it from his hip pocket and blew his nose. "Hi, Sam. What're you doin' out here? Thought you'd be laid up a spell." He stuffed the bandanna back into his hip pocket. He was a small, sharp-eyed man in his forties, lean and weather brown.

Sam pinched the fire in his smoke between thumb and forefinger and let the wind take the remains of his cigarette. "Going home. Thought I'd see if I could cut a track here."

Alonzo grunted. "In this wind? Can't hardly breathe, let alone see. Where you ought to be is home in bed."

Sam decided to ignore the advice. Instead he asked, "Wind start blowing before you got here?"

"No, I picked up a trail of sorts."

Sam waited, knowing that Winner had other information to give. He'd give it in his own way and his own time.

"Fella tied his horse up there in that gully I came out of," the sheriff said, pointing. "He waited 'til you come along and then shot at point-blank range. Wonder you got any head left, Sam."

"I didn't know I'd be riding along here just then," Sam said.

"Well, maybe. This ambusher, Sam, I backtracked him first off. He was followin' you from the start, from Crossroad Corners. Waited up there while you messed around Fill's ol' barn. He could of had his try at you no matter which way you went."

"Who was it, Alonzo?"

The sheriff signed and shook his head. "Tracked him to Squaw Creek and lost the trail. Lost it right there by that big old rotten stump of a cottonwood."

On Kenton's range, Sam thought.

Everybody in the country knew the stump of cottonwood. Everybody called it the hanging tree. A group of cattlemen, years ago, made an example of a cattle rustler named Long John, hanging him to the tree. Many of the county's inhabitants pointed to the dead tree as mute evidence that the wrong man had been strung up. It was told that the tree started dying as soon as Long John stopped kicking from the end of a rope.

Alonzo read his thoughts. "It'd be a mistake to go jumping to conclusions about where I lost the trail, Sam."

"Meaning it couldn't have been Kenton's man?" Sam asked. "Or even Jesse himself?"

Alonzo Winner sighed. He'd seen Sam and the country growing up but there was a side of him that was all lawman and nothing else. "I wouldn't guess about something like

that. But I heard about you roughing Marv Teller. He's the kind of man who'd think about revenge."

"Marv is Jesse's man. He wouldn't move without a word from Kenton."

"Marv is a natural born killer, one of the few I've known. Oh, he goes off by himself and gets drunk after killin' a man but he don't let that stop him from killin' again."

Sam looked at Winner. "How do you stand with Kenton, Alonzo?"

Winner gave a wintry smile. "Jesse Kenton hasn't got the time of day for me. I don't run my job to suit him. I treat him just like I treat anybody else and he doesn't like it." He hesitated and then almost reluctantly reached in a side pocket of his coat and brought out a glove. He tossed it to Sam. "The killer dropped this, Sam. Not much to go on, is it?"

Sam studied the buckskin glove of soft tanned deerhide. "I'll keep it if you don't mind. Pat and Mike—it'll give them something to go on," he said in a grim voice.

"You're in no shape to take the trail by yourself, even with your dogs," Winner said. "After I get cleaned up and tend to some business in my office I'll come back out and go with you."

"I'll meet you at the old cottonwood where you lost the trail," Sam said. "At daylight tomorrow."

Nodding, Winner mounted his horse and rode toward Crossroad Corners.

Sam watched him out of sight and then got on his horse and headed for Flag.

Wish I'd told him about my brush with the farmer, he thought gloomily as he rode. After a while the wind slacked off but it did nothing for his taut nerves. He could open his eyes now, not have to squint and he slipped the neckerchief from his nose and mouth. His head didn't ache as much as it had but nothing else was changed.

He crossed the creek separating Flag from Kenton's J Bar K and his horse quickened its pace of its own accord, climbing the long incline toward the frost-tinted cottonwood grove that surrounded the old stone house where he and Dick lived. A few gaunt cows bawling piteously nosed at damp spots in the creek bed. He felt his insides tighten.

The hounds bayed out to meet him. They stopped their alarm when they got his familiar scent but came on, grinning and wagging their behinds. He stepped down from the saddle and bent to scratch Mike's ears while Pat, a standoffish blue tick, sat regarding him with sad eyes. The wind was rising again; the cottonwoods rustled and red-gold leaves drifted down to be caught by the wind and whirled away.

He led the horse to the barn, followed by the hounds. He stripped off the hull in the odorous dimness and hung the saddle blanket where it would dry out. He rubbed the horse down with a dry gunny sack and led him to the back door of the ranch house. The horse whinnied, no doubt remembering that he'd been watered at this spot before, from the barrels of water in the kitchen.

Sam frowned, looking about for the tin tub used for a watering trough. He spied it where the wind had blown it into the cottonwoods a hundred feet away. He dropped the reins and went toward the battered gray galvanized container. He was lifting it when the shotgun blast straightened him.

VII

SAM DROPPED the tub and drew his pistol, turning in behind a thick-boled cottonwood. The horse was down on its knees before the open door of the kitchen, its nose in the dirt. It toppled as he watched, kicking spasmodically, and then was still.

Sam ran from tree to tree, angling toward the house, keeping the entire house under surveillance. He saw nothing moving as he neared the stone pile, taut, tense, ready to shoot.

He came to the last tree and the open space surrounding the house. He stopped there but only for a moment. He sucked in his breath and went at a long-legged lope toward the kitchen window. He made the house without drawing fire, pressing against the solid stone, debating his next move.

Sam listened, hearing nothing. He took a look around and then edged up to the window, peering over the sill from a kneeling position. There was no one inside. He stared in anger and amazement at the rigging near the door. Someone had set a deadly trap for him. A double-barreled shotgun, his own, was tied to a table that had been pushed up before the door. Twine ran from the trigger to the cook stove, then to the door. When the thirsty horse nudged the door open the shotgun fired, killing the animal.

Sam kept his gun in his hand as he walked around the corner. The horse was dead. He stepped over the animal and edged through the door, the frame splintered from a double charge of double-ought buckshot. He went through the house room by room and found nothing. He came back to the kitchen and stood there, still holding his gun. He

absently returned it to the holster and surveyed the room. Whoever had rigged the trap had used everything belonging to Sam—the gun, ammunition, twine—and it indicated to Sam that it had been a spur of the moment arrangement.

He smiled grimly and set about putting the place in order.

After breakfast the next morning, Sam headed out for his rendezvous with Sheriff Alonzo Winner. It was early morning; the heat had not yet settled down to burn the land still more. The dogs ranged ahead, to the side, dropping back and then passing him. He had not hunted with them for some time and they were happy to be out again.

Winner was waiting beside the cottonwood, his camp fire almost out. He was dusty and needed a shave, his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep. He squatted beside his dying fire as Sam dismounted and said, "There's a bit of coffee left, Sam."

"You look kind of beat," Sam said and took the tin cup Winner offered. He poured the coffee carefully so as not to disturb the grounds in the bottom of the pot. He called the dogs that were sniffing around Winner's horse and ordered them to lie. They obeyed on the first command, watching Sam's face as he sipped the coffee.

Winner picked a coffee ground from his tongue. "I am. Feel like I been run through a meat grinder." He gazed into the fire. "You think those dogs can track a man on a horse?"

Sam nodded. "Sure. They've done it before. In fact I was up at daybreak this morning, tracking a man on a horse."

Winner stared at Sam.

"Somebody set a shotgun trap for me, Alonzo," he said, and related how his own Greener had been rigged to fire when the door opened. "Killed my horse. It could have been me. I let the dogs have a whiff of that glove you gave me

and put them on the trail. They went straight as the crow flies to Kenton's J Bar K."

"Jesse Kenton wouldn't do anything like that," Winner said, shaking his head.

"Not Kenton," Sam agreed. "Marv Teller, Alonzo. Jesse doesn't have to do dirty work. Not with a dog like Teller working for him."

"You can't prove it in a court of law, Sam."

"No, I can't. But I'll bet you a dollar against a plugged nickel that this trail here will head straight to Kenton range."

"Kenton's got a dozen riders."

"I've had trouble with just one of them," Sam said, rising. "Let's go."

The mountains were etched in purple ink against a blue sky. The sun beat down, forcing them out of their coats. The wind lifted sheets of dust and rattled the sage and bent the pine trees. It was a land of death with no living thing in sight except the two horses, the two dogs ranging ahead, and the sweating men.

Several times they had to wait while the dogs ran back and forth where Squaw Creek, now powder dry, emerged from Squaw Canyon. Sam sat his horse, watching patiently, a smile twitching at his lips as the dogs fought one another to find the trail. Pat gave a short bay and trotted up the canyon, his tail erect, his nose to the ground. Mike tried to shoulder him aside.

"Leading to Kenton's all right," Winner muttered.

The dogs disappeared around a turn in the canyon. A shot sounded, a .44-40, Sam's mind automatically catalogued it. Then another, even while the echoes of the first shot thundered back and forth. Sam stopped his horse as did Winner. They looked at one another and then Sam dug in his spurs and shouted, "Hup!" The horse lunged ahead.

Sam rode recklessly around the turn and even prepared for what to expect, his guts knotted. The two hounds lay on

the trail, not even twitching. He got off his horse fast when the hidden rifleman fired again, the bullet plucking viciously at his hat which sailed away. He yanked out his saddle gun and dove for the brush shouting, "Stay back, Alonzo!"

Alonzo Winner came into sight as the rifle spoke again. Sam heard the impact of the bullet and turned his head to see Sheriff Winner falling from his horse; the loose uncontrolled action of the body spoke of death. Sam fired at the wind-shredded powder smoke, fired until the rifle was empty, searching the rock and brush with a killing mad volley for the hidden ambusher. Anger blinded him, making him foolishly reckless.

He jammed more cartridges into the magazine, scanning the land, looking for movement. He waited, his rifle ready, and saw nothing. Impatience rode him hard. Dragging the rifle after him he crawled to Alonzo's side. The bullet had entered his chest just to the left of the shiny badge. He was dead.

Hearing a faint clink of iron on stone, Sam ran to his horse and mounted, riding low, bent to one side, spurring toward the ambush. He came around a rock, the horse blowing and snorting as Sam reined him short. He saw at a glance where the rifleman had stood to shoot, where the killer's horse waited nearby. The land ahead, broken by rock and pine, was still, silent. Sam lifted the horse into a trot, erect in the saddle, the rifle ready in one hand.

There was something ahead and he brought the horse to a walk, his nerves tense as coiled springs. He rounded a turn and stopped, swearing softly in amazement and anger.

The canyon flattened out here and an earthen dam had been thrown from one side of the canyon to the other. A small lake stretched out before him and bunches of cattle stood knee-deep in water, drinking. A wave of rage shook him. Kenton had broken one of the basic laws of the range in damming the Squaw.

He put his horse along the edge of the ten-acre lake, moving past the cattle. The trail ran out of the canyon and connected with the wagon road from Crossroad Corners to Kenton's ranch. From here, the road ran in a fairly straight line to the J Bar K buildings dotting the landscape in the distance. The ambusher, Sam reasoned, would have had time to off-saddle and build an alibi.

He sat his horse, staring at the group of buildings, seeing a man, tiny in the distance, come from the barn and walk toward the big house. To Sam the man appeared to be Marv Teller, but he couldn't be sure. Sweat stood on his face and he wanted to rush down there and fight and destroy the arrogant man who'd betrayed, not only him, but every rancher in the valley.

VIII

THERE WAS no hint of the emotions boiling in Sam when he tied his horse in front of Kenton's big rambling ranch house. When he reached the foot of the steps Kenton came out and leaned against the porch post.

"Well, Sam, sure glad you come to see me," he said. "Where's the kid brother?"

Sam studied him in silence. Finally, he said, "I didn't come by the wagon road, Kenton. I rode through Squaw Canyon."

Marv Teller came out of the house and stood close beside Kenton, looking at Sam with dead eyes. Kenton's face didn't change at all, but he gave Teller a quick sharp look that seemed to be a signal.

"A man's got to look out for himself, Sam," he said slowly.

"Ain't nobody else gonna do that as good as the man doing the looking."

Sam swallowed, suddenly hating this man with an even fiercer intensity. "You've changed your tune," he said evenly. "You was saying just a short time ago that we all had to stand together."

"That still goes," Kenton said quickly. "That's the only way the problem can be whipped."

Sam laughed bitterly. He shifted slightly to face Teller. "And something else, Jesse. Somebody tried to kill me last night. Set a trap in my own house and nearly got me. Then when Alonzo Winner and I were tracking that same killer, Alonzo was shot and so were my two dogs."

Kenton's frosty gray eyes flickered. "Is that a fact, Sam?"

"You've pulled a dirty trick, Kenton," Sam said flatly. "I don't take to it. If you'd do something like that you'd do even worse. Like trying to have me killed."

"Sam, believe me, I don't want you dead," Kenton said earnestly.

Teller said in a soft voice, "You gonna let him talk to you like that, Mr. Kenton?" His eyes didn't leave Sam's face for a moment. His right hand rested idly on his pistol butt.

"I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. Somebody wants me dead, real bad. He keeps trying." He swung to face Teller. "You know anything about that?"

Teller's lead-colored eyes suddenly glittered and narrowed. He said thickly, "Get out of here," and backed away a few careful steps.

"Marv!" Kenton spoke sharply.

Teller shook his head, looked sullenly at Kenton and turned and walked back inside the house.

Kenton sighed deeply. *God,* he thought, *that was close.*

Sam let his dark glance rest on Kenton. "I'm going to bring in Reno and George," he said. "I'm going to tear that dam out, Kenton. You'd better not try to stop us."

Kenton's face purpled. "You're asking for big trouble," he said, and when Sam, blinded with rage, stepped up on the porch, he called, "Marv!"

Teller came through the door drawing his gun. Sam forgot the pistol on his hip. He hooked a left into Teller's ribs and grabbed his gun hand with his right and twisted and heaved. Off balance, Teller went crashing into the wall. Sam moved in fast, possessed of a wild and burning rage. He slammed his fist in Teller's face and drove him to the end of the porch with wild swinging rights and lefts. Teller teetered on the edge of the porch and Sam hit him with all the power in his heavy shoulder. The sound was like that of a stick snapping. Teller's head snapped back, his feet flew up and he struck the ground with a skull-cracking thump.

Sam turned back to Kenton, his big chest rising and falling rapidly. "It's your move, Kenton," he said in a strained voice.

Kenton smiled a careful smile. He said, "We can work something out, Sam," in a careful voice.

Sam backed down from the porch and without taking his eyes off Kenton stepped to his horse and rose to the saddle. He rode sideways in the saddle, watching Kenton leap to the ground and bend over Teller.

Kenton got Teller into the house while he was still unconscious. It took him ten minutes to bring the gunman to life. Teller gradually grasped that Sam Harden had beaten him unmercifully. His first words, delivered in a thin, mean whine: "I'll kill him, I'll kill him!"

Kenton lighted his cigar. "I wasn't funning, Marv. I don't want him dead. Not yet."

"Don't try to keep me from it!"

"You'll get your chance," Kenton said smoothly. "In the meantime, what do you think would hurt Sam Harden more than anything else?"

Teller looked at him with interest.

"That kid brother of his."

"You don't have to say another word, Mr. Kenton."

Kenton smiled. "I thought you'd catch on, Marv."

They both stiffened as someone hailed the house. Kenton walked to the doorway as Clay Bassett rode up to the rail, his face cheerful.

"Hi-ya, Mr. Kenton. Ain't seen my wanderin' boss, have you?"

"Get down and come in, Clay," Kenton said heartily, thinking, *He hasn't seen Sam lately or he wouldn't be so friendly.*

"Ain't got time, but thanks," Clay said in a pleased voice. "I got to find Sam and quick."

"Why, what's happened, Clay?"

"Just a family matter," Clay said uneasily and tightened his reins.

"Sam has been here but he's gone," Kenton said in his friendliest manner. He came down the steps and stood close to the rail, looking at Clay. "I been thinking about a proposition, Clay, you might be interested in."

Clay's smile faded. "What's that?" he asked cautiously.

Kenton chuckled. He ended the chuckle on a sad note and his face saddened, along with it. "Fact is, Clay," he said seriously, "Winner's dead. We're gonna need a new sheriff."

Clay's face expressed shock and surprise. "Alonzo? When'd that happen? An' how?"

"He was trackin' the man who tried to kill Sam," Kenton said. "Got ambushed in Squaw Canyon."

"Well, I'll be damned," Clay said heavily. "Gosh, old Alonzo was a good man."

"That he was," Kenton agreed. "I been thinkin' about a replacement, Clay. How'd you like the job?"

"Who, me? Hell, Mr. Kenton, I'm just an old cowpoke an' don't know nothin' about law."

"Alonzo didn't either when he started," Kenton said. "How about it, Clay? You can have the job if you want it. What's more, I think the pay is goin' to be raised, too."

"Gosh, I never worked nowhere but for Flag—"

"Well, you think about it, Clay. I'll see you in a day or so and you can give me your answer. Personally, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have in there than you."

"Thanks, Mr. Kenton. I'll sure think on it." Clay raised his hand and wheeled his horse and rode toward Crossroad Corners. He was elated that a big man like Jesse Kenton had offered him the job—no, had begged him—to become sheriff. *Man, oh, man,* he thought, *wouldn't Hannah Evans sit up when he come around wearing that badge?*

When Sam turned into the first street in Crossroad Corners he picked up a boy of ten, wearing a hat too big for him. The boy trotted alongside, looking wide-eyed at Winner's body, draped face down across his horse.

"Run find Doc Sawyer," Sam said to the boy. "Tell him to come to the sheriff's office."

The boy was off like an arrow loosed from a bow, holding his big hat to keep it from falling off.

Sam walked his horse slowly down the street and men fell in, silently, following. By the time he stopped before the sheriff's office a dozen men were around him, lifting Winner from his horse. Doc Sawyer appeared, hatless and coatless, his shirt sleeves rolled up, carrying his bag. He slowed his pace and stopped close to Winner's body. He gave his head a single shake, sighing.

"What happened, Sam?" he asked quietly.

The ring of men closed in as Sam began telling what happened in Squaw Canyon. He told it in a flat, monotonous voice, a meager recital of facts. He didn't elaborate on it

and he didn't even mention his discovery of Kenton's dam and his fight with Marv Teller.

The faces of the men, mostly businessmen in town, mirrored their anxiety. Jesse Kenton was the biggest man in those parts. They were reluctant to express judgment. They looked at Sam doubtfully but he failed to notice the town men's reaction.

Ketterman said, uneasily, "This ain't the time to make a judgment, no sir. We have a dead man here, our sheriff, our friend—"

Doc Sawyer interrupted in his soft, suave manner. "A few of you take Alonzo to the undertaking parlor. As your coroner I'm declaring that Sheriff Alonzo Winner was killed by a person or persons unknown, while performing his duty. When a new sheriff is appointed we'll look into it."

He turned and looked at Sam. "What the hell you doing out of bed?" he asked in an icy voice.

Sam laughed without humor. "Too many things to do, Doc."

"Come on over to my office. I want to look at you."

Sam fell into step beside Doc Sawyer. Halfway across the street he stopped, hearing his name called. He stopped and Doc Sawyer snorted, "Now come on, Sam, don't get involved in a long-winded dialogue."

Clay Bassett got down from his sweat-stained horse. His face was downcast and his manner uneasy. He stared at the group of men carrying Alonzo Winner's body to the undertaking parlor.

"What's up?"

Sam sketched out what had happened and Clay whistled. "You mean ol' Jesse really dammed the creek?"

The enormity of Kenton's act overshadowed even Winner's death. "Well, what're we gonna do?"

"Blow it to hell and gone out of there," Sam said. "What else?"

"Kenton won't sit still for that," Clay said.

"That's up to him," Sam answered. He stared at Bassett and the westerning sun touched his lank black hair and drew a pattern of shadows on his handsome, swarthy face. "What'd you want when you first got here?"

Clay's face resumed its uneasy pattern. "I thought you'd have heard by now," he said hopefully.

"What is it, Clay?" His head came up sharply. "Dick?"

"Sure," Bassett said, a feeble grin working on his long lips. "Who else?"

"Don't ride a circle on me," he said. "What's up, Clay?"

Bassett licked his lips. "Dick's married, Sam."

Sam felt the familiar knot form in his belly. He stared at the parched land. Liz Porter was not cold in her grave and Dick was now married to another woman. It didn't make sense. "Who'd he marry?"

Bassett thought, *Here it comes*, and wished that he didn't have to do the telling. "That Keefe girl," he said. "Cherry's her name."

"What the hell did you let him do that for?" Sam asked hotly, knowing even as he spoke that he shouldn't be taking it out on Clay.

"Look, Sam, I wasn't even around," Clay protested. "I rode all over hell and half of Montana lookin' for you to tell you."

Sam looked at Clay, irritated with him and knowing how irrational his actions were. "You ramrodding Flag or wet-nursing my brother?" he asked coldly.

"I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't," Clay said. "What's got into you, Sam?"

"Where's Dick now?" Sam asked.

"The hotel," Clay said, and started to offer some advice but the look on Sam's face forbade it. He watched Sam stride down the street and enter the hotel. *I sure wouldn't want to be li'l brother*, he thought, and drifted toward The

Mint, intent on catching up on his drinking and news gathering. He knew Sam would come looking for him later and The Mint was always the first place he looked.

The hotel lobby was empty. Sam looked at the register and found the room where Dick and Cherry were staying, the two rooms called the suite that Fill McGee had boastfully set aside for visiting celebrities. The only personage ever using the rooms had been some general whose name Sam couldn't even remember.

He rapped on the door with hard brown knuckles and there was a soft sound on the other side and it swung open.

She stood framed in the doorway; he realized suddenly he had never really looked at her before. Without the flamboyant dress and the paint and powder she looked plain, with a small earnest face and big blue eyes. She was almost thin.

Unsmiling he stared at her. "Is he still drunk?"

Her hand went to the hollow at the base of her throat. "What do you mean?" she asked, in a low, throaty voice that he remembered sounded well, even when the musician was too drunk to accompany her on the pianola.

"He was drunk, wasn't he?"

"No." She watched him gravely, a sort of caution in her blue eyes. "This will surprise you, perhaps. He wasn't even drinking." She stood there as though barring his way into the room.

"I think maybe we better talk," he said.

She looked scared. "What about?"

"Cherry!" Dick's voice came from behind the inner closed door.

She gave Sam a sharp, bitter glance and hurried across the room, disappearing through the door. He heard the low mutter of voices behind it. Then it opened and Cherry came out first, followed by Dick, wearing only pants and undershirt and a sheepish grin.

"You met Cherry, huh? Purty ain't she?" He pulled a

chair out from the wall and straddled it, looking up at Sam with a stubborn expression.

"Yeah. We met," Sam said.

"Ain't you gonna congratulate me?"

"Congratulations."

"Oh, damn!" Dick exploded.

"You'll have to pardon me," Sam said. "I've got a few weighty problems on my mind. And somebody's been busy trying to kill me off. So you might say that this takes up a lot of energy that otherwise might be used to congratulate you."

Dick's face darkened. "Real funny," he said softly. He stood up, his fists clenched. "One of these days, Sam, you—"

Sam looked at Cherry. "I want to talk to him—alone."

She nodded, walked to the inner door and disappeared in the other room, closing the door with a bang. Dick stood there, looking at him expectantly, with a touch of dread on his face.

"You've really played hell," Sam said, as quietly as he could. "I didn't even know you were interested in this girl." He suddenly remembered that Cherry had been in this hotel the night Dick was on the prod. Molly McGee had said she was visiting a friend.

"Oh, hell, I've been friends with Cherry ever since her brother got killed."

"You'd better get rid of her," Sam said. "She's a dance hall girl, Dick."

Dick's mouth was suddenly ringed with white. "She's my wife, Sam."

Sam laughed deep in his throat.

Dick grabbed his arm. "Don't laugh like that" he said, low-voiced between clenched teeth. "Don't do it."

"You can give her a hundred bucks and tell her—"

Dick pushed him. "Get out, Sam, while you're in one piece!"

"You're a fool," Sam Harden said, knocking his brother's hand from his arm.

Dick's face twisted with rage. "Get out, Sam, before I kill you!"

IX

When Sam reached the lobby Molly McGee was lighting a lamp. She turned around when she heard him and, smiling, said, "Come on back. I've a pot of coffee on the stove."

He followed her to the back of the hotel and into the corner apartment where she lived with her father. It was a pleasant room, the kitchen, with reflector lamps on the wall, bright curtains, a highly polished cook stove, and with the warm smell of coffee in the air. A coffee grinder stood on the table, attesting to the freshness of the steaming brew.

"I guess you heard Dick got married," he said with a twist to his mouth.

"Well, he's young and handsome—and rich," she said.

"But he married a dance hall girl," he said, watching her, waiting for her shocked surprise.

There was none. He felt let down as she tilted her head back and looked at him. "She sings, Sam," she said.

He wrinkled his forehead and came to the stove, shrugging out of his coat and hanging it over the back of a chair. He pushed the chair closer to the stove. "Yeah, a dance hall girl."

She put her back to the stove and crossed her arms,

clasping her upper arms with brown hands. "You're not happy about that, Sam?"

"Should I be?"

She laughed, shaking her head. "You men—you do any darn thing you please—insisting all the time on women being up on a pedestal." She uncrossed her arms and went with her lithe walk to the cupboard to get two cups and two saucers. She brought them to the red and white checkered cloth-covered table. "Pour the coffee, Sam."

He poured the coffee and put the pot back on the stove, shaking his head. "I can't figure you. Go to church every Sunday, teach a class, too. Yet you take the news that Dick married a dance hall girl as though it was all right."

"Maybe it is all right. All the good people in the world don't go to church."

"I'll swear," he said heavily and sat down. "You think she's the woman for him, then?"

"That's for Dick to decide," she said and sat across the table from him. She rested her chin on her hand, looking at him. "Why don't you give them a chance?"

"I guess it took me by surprise," Sam said. "I didn't even realize he knew her."

"Maybe I should have told you," she said.

He stared at her in surprise. "You knew all the time?" Without waiting for an answer he added angrily, "When did it start?"

She flinched at the sudden anger. "They've been seeing each other for a long time, more often since her brother was killed. She was all alone . . . I guess Dick felt sorry for her."

That's Dick all right, he thought, *always picking up strays.* The sound of a running horse came to them and then a strident voice called, "Whoa! Whoa, Charlie!"

She looked at him wide-eyed. "That's Fill."

The rapid drum of boots spoke of a man in a hurry. Fill

McGee plunged through the door, his mouth open. He saw Sam at once and he slowed down, gulped once, and then came more slowly to stand in the middle of the room. He seemed at loss for words. "Didn't know you'd be here, Sam," he said, and then, "How's your head?"

"Fine." Sam said no more, waiting expectantly. "You were in an awful hurry when you came in," Sam added, when the silence grew heavy.

Never an indecisive man, McGee drew in a deep breath. "Sam, I didn't expect to find you here. Maybe it's just as well because I've got a mountain lion by the tail and can't let go."

"More trouble," Sam said.

McGee nodded. "More than I can handle. The settlers are out of hand. They're goin' to hang Reno. On their way to his spread this minute. I thought I'd get Alonzo—nearly killed poor ol' Charlie getting here. To find our sheriff dead. What'll I do? I can't stop 'em by myself."

"I'll get Clay and as many of my men as possible," Sam said quietly. "This is one thing we can't let happen, Fill. I was banking on Reno to help us out of the mess we're in."

"Now, those settlers are not all that bad," Fill said with some heat. "Reno has been askin' for trouble, actin' like he has."

"It's not the settlers at all," Sam said, forcing himself to speak quietly and without any trace of the rage that gripped him. "For the most part, it's Jesse Kenton." In as few words as possible he sketched the attempt on his life at the ranch, the trail that led to Kenton's, the ambush that killed Winner, and then finding that the Squaw had been dammed.

"And you can take some of the blame, Fill," he finished. "You brought these settlers in."

"No such thing," McGee declared. "They came and I helped them as much as I could. If we'd take those settlers in and help them get established, they could even help us.

Our cattle will never survive without the settlers' help. There's enough of them to take bunches of stock and care for them through this drought."

"You're out of your mind," Sam said swiftly. "I've got no time to talk. I've got to get out to Reno's place in a hurry."

"And that's a fact," McGee said wearily.

"Be careful, Sam," Molly said as Sam took long steps toward the door.

Molly and her father listened to the sounds of Sam's rapidly retreating footsteps. Fill looked at his daughter. "You like him a lot, Mol girl?"

She nodded, feeling the rough texture of Sam's coat which he'd left hanging on a chair. *Smelly old thing*, she thought, *and he's gone off and left it.* "Since I wore pigtails," she said.

"He's a lot of man," McGee said. "Terrible temper like all them Hardens, but he's different, too."

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"Not as bullheaded as the rest. He can change his mind, and not pussyfoot about it."

"I hope he changes his mind about going to Reno's."

"He won't change his mind about that. Not if he has to go by himself," McGee declared with conviction.

On the sidewalk Sam gulped in the dry piny breeze and slowed his steps as he gathered his thoughts. He barely noticed the loiterers in front of The Mint as he breasted the batwings. The bar held a dozen or so men; Clay Bassett and Kenton stood apart at one end.

Sam headed directly for Clay, shaking his head at Leo. "Come outside, Clay," he said. "It's important." He ignored Kenton.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kenton look at Clay with a half smile on his face.

Clay toyed with his glass, not looking at Sam, nor moving from his lounging position, elbow on the bar, slack footed.

Sam raised his voice. "No time to lose, Clay," he said urgently. "Let's move, man!"

Sam was halfway to the door when he sensed Clay wasn't with him. He whirled and tramped back to the door. "What's the holdup?" he asked angrily.

"No holdup, Sam," Clay said flatly. "I'm not going."

"You know what you're saying?"

"Sure. I quit, Sam. I don't work for Flag, not anymore I don't."

Sam looked intently at Kenton for the first time, saw the maddening smile that said more than words how Kenton was enjoying this.

"Want to fill me in, Clay?" Sam asked, struggling to control his temper.

"I don't want to talk about it, Sam. I'm just not Flag ramrod. Not anymore I'm not."

"Want to tell me what you are going to do?"

Clay grew sullen and didn't look at Sam. He wasn't enjoying this as much as he thought he would. "I'm filling in Alonzo Winner's unexpired term," he said. "Maybe I'll run on my own in the next election."

Sam stared unbelievingly. "Sheriff? Clay, you wouldn't make a pimple on a good sheriff's tail." He looked at Kenton, staring for long seconds and spoke to him: "You think you've pulled a woolly, Jesse."

"The job has got to be filled," Kenton said and turned back to his drink.

"Order up a few men, sheriff," Sam told Clay. "There's a mob going after Reno. As sheriff you ought to be on your way right now."

"Can't do it, Sam," Clay said. "Haven't been sworn in yet. Won't be 'til the circuit judge comes next week."

"You're worried about nothing, Sam," Kenton said. "These farmers are trashy yellow dogs. They haven't got guts enough

to brace even old stingy, cowardly Reno Milser. You were always one to run off at the mouth, Sam."

"Kenton, you were always one to do the running but I think it's about ended. You're biting off a hunk of trouble and it's gonna choke you to death." He wheeled and tramped out.

Sam scuffed through the dust to Ora Ketterman's livery and had Ketterman saddle a fresh horse. He rode fast out of town, heading through the night toward Reno Milser's Running M. Heat lightning played with the peaks to the south and a rumble of thunder came faintly to him. He gathered no hope from this. There weren't enough clouds to hold a cupful of rain.

He hoped he wouldn't be too late to help Reno. The farmers had a good hour's start on him.

X

THE HORSE Ketterman saddled for Sam was a rangy Appaloosa gelding. One touch of the spur was all that was needed and the night became a blur as the horse scattered across the range, the lights of Crossroad Corners dipping out of sight almost at once.

It was a wild, uncontrolled ride and horse and rider became one in the fierce, plunging flight under a velvet canopy of diamond-studded brilliance.

Sam could hear the mob even before he reached the ranch. It was a sound like the wind roaring in trees, gradually

growing louder. The horse flung itself around a low pine-dotted butte and there was Milser's place. The horse, sensing an end to the ride, surged toward the blazing fire in front of Reno's big barn. Reno was standing beside the fire, arms bound to his side, glassy-eyed, surrounded by more than a dozen men. With a shock Sam saw that a tripod of three poles had been erected and Reno was standing in the center of this tripod with a rope around his neck.

Sam yelled and set his spurs and went through the crowd, swinging his pistol like a club. A man leaped up and wrapped his arms around Sam from behind and dragged him from the horse. They rolled and thrashed beneath the trampling hoofs. The horse uttered a terrified whinny and bolted away. Hands clawed and struck at Sam as he broke away, aware of the savage, roaring animal sounds, and Reno's suddenly frenzied screams of hope.

Gaining his feet, Sam staggered to meet them. He had lost his pistol and blind with rage he slugged anyone near him, knocking men asprawl, but they engulfed him, dragging him to the ground, holding him helpless.

A big bearded man near Reno kicked the nail keg on which the rancher was standing. Reno dropped but the drop wasn't enough to break his neck; he writhed, kicking and struggling while the mob roared their hatred. One man leaped out, grabbing the struggling body and yanked down. The crowd sound stopped suddenly at this act. There was a moment of silence broken only by a sharp, snapping sound. The man stepped away and Reno's body hung limp.

Sam lay there on the ground, bruised and dazed. The mob was quiet now. Their victim was dead and they drew away, going back to their horses and rigs that had brought them there on vengeance bent.

A thin man sitting on the ground raised his head, looking at Sam. Slowly he got to his feet and came over to Sam.

"My name is Hurt. They hung Reno 'count o' my datter. Hung him just like they butcher a damn pig."

Sam shook his head.

Hurt continued, "You better come in the cabin and let m' wife look at your head. That bandage is all bloody."

He helped Sam to his feet and walked him to the cabin door. It was the foreman's cabin, Sam remembered hazily. He asked, "Where's Reno's men?"

"Reno let his men go when me and my fambly come," Hurt said. He pounded on the door. "Let me in, woman. They're all gone."

There was a sound of the bar being lifted and the door opened cautiously; a fat fearful-faced woman peered out. "It is you!" the woman cried and threw open the door. She saw Sam and made a motion to close it.

"Don't shet the door," Hurt said crossly. "This feller tried to save Reno. Guess he's lucky they didn't kill him, too."

Hurt guided Sam into the cabin. "You fix his head," he told his wife. "I'll go take Reno down."

Sam wiped a hand across his sweating face. It came away with blood on it.

"Sit right here," the woman said, pushing a chair up to the table. She rummaged in a sewing basket and found a pair of scissors with which she snipped the bandage loose from Sam's head. She bent to look at it. "Old wound's broke open," she said.

"Well, fix it," Hurt said and went out, closing the door behind him.

Sam was aware of the child sitting on the hearth then, looking wide-eyed and scared at him. This was the girl Reno would have married—if he'd lived.

The woman spoke to the child: "Judy, honey, you fix a pallet here on the floor for our mister hurt man to lie on."

"My name is Sam Harden," Sam mumbled, as the girl jumped up to do as she was told.

The girl brought a patchwork quilt and spread it before the fireplace. The woman said, "You better lie down there, Sam Harden, where I can get at it better."

She helped Sam to the quilt. He was glad to lie down despite the fact that a great restlessness was in him, pushing him like a hand at his back. He lay prone and closed his eyes. He had to be off, fast. There was George Balfont at the Limber Creek ranch. George would back him up and right now he felt the need for support.

But he was tired, too. His head ached. He opened his eyes and saw the woman kneeling beside him with a glass in her hand. "Here, drink this first," she said, looking at his torn clothing.

He struggled upright. The liquid was bitter but not unpleasant. It warmed his throat, chest and stomach. He lay back down.

"I can see you tried to stop 'em," she said. "Wonder you didn't get killed."

"I tried," Sam said. He felt her hands, surprisingly gentle at his head, and then he slept.

Sam slept through the night and by morning he had only a throbbing headache. He had breakfast with the Hurts.

"I done buried him," Hurt said bluntly. "It's a hell of a country to live in so I guess he's not so bad off."

"Oh, Hurt, don't say such awful things," protested Mrs. Hurt.

"S' truth, so help me. Don't know what we gonna do now."

"The Lord'll provide, Hurt," the fat woman said unconvincingly. "He allus has."

"Amen," Hurt said.

"What's that noise?" Sam asked, cocking his head at the unfamiliar sound.

"Windmill," Hurt said briefly. "I dug a well for Reno first week I was here. Got water at sixty-six feet."

Sam walked to the door. The windmill was a quarter of a

mile away and the brisk wind spun the blades until they blurred. Water being pumped out of the ground. He whistled in amazement, not at the water, but the long string of wagons spotted a mile apart until they disappeared over a ridge. "What's the wagons doing out there just standing there?" he asked.

"Silage. Reno ordered it from Iowa. Brought in two carloads, got two more comin' next week. Hauled it in from the railroad in wagons and unloaded it right where the stock feed."

"Reno never said a word about all this," Sam said bitterly.

"You his partner?" Hurt asked.

Sam shook his head. "Not partners in the legal sense. But, man, in this country—"

"He was your competition," Hurt observed. "This drought ain't gonna last forever. The market back east is comin' back when the panic's over. Anybody got nice fat beef then, well, he'll be sittin' in clover."

"I'm beginning to find out a few things," Sam said, and didn't voice his thoughtful hope that it wasn't too late.

"You goin' back to town now?" Hurt asked, when Sam headed for the corral.

Sam shook his head. "I'm heading to Balfont's on Limber Creek."

Hurt followed him as he cut out the Apaloosa and saddled it. He mounted, thanked Hurt and cut across country toward Limber Creek.

Balfont wasn't at his ranch. The small knot of dread in Sam got bigger and he dwelled on the fact that he could spend the rest of the week looking for Balfont in the canyons that stretched from the creek clear to the other side of the mountain.

He was adjusting his saddle blanket when a Balfont hand, a 17-year-old named Chinch rode in.

"Where's George?" Sam asked, after the usual greetings were over.

Chinch's fuzzy and freckled face was solemn. "Mr. Balfont ain't been back since he went into Crossroad Corners some few days ago."

Sam felt the knot in his belly enlarge. "You sure?"

The boy nodded. "Yes, sir. There's just two o' us hands left, me and Spike. We didn't find him in town. An' ain't nobody seen him. Plain up and disappeared."

Dub Porter, Sam thought. But Dub wasn't the kind of man to ambush another. Or was he? Sam was beginning to believe he didn't know much about people. He dropped his stirrup and mounted, nodding to Chinch. "If he shows up tell him I got to see him. It's real important."

"Sure will, Mr. Harden," Cinch said and waved a farewell. He wanted to ask Sam about his clothing being torn but he had been taught not to ask personal questions. He watched Sam ride in the direction of Flag ranch and shook his head in bewilderment. There was a lot of talk going around and a man just didn't know what to believe.

It was dark when Sam rode into Flag. Tired and discouraged he off-saddled the Apaloosa and turned it into the barn, thinking he'd lug water later. It came to him as he forked hay down that the hounds hadn't come baying and then there was that hurt remembrance that they'd never greet him again.

He hung up the fork, uneasy, wishing he had the extra pistol in the house. He hadn't been able to find the one he lost the night before. He walked toward the house, stopping as a dark shape detached itself from the dark blot of the house and came toward him.

"Harden?" It was a slow drawl, unfamiliar to him.

He was alert, his spine tingling again. "Yes, I'm Harden."

"Cooney here. I been waitin'."

Texas John Cooney. Another problem. Sam went ahead once more. "You alone, Cooney?"

"Sure am." He fell in beside Sam and they walked together to the back door.

Sam went in and, knowing his house, went directly to the table. Cooney was a dark silent shape in the open doorway. Sam got a match from his pocket, wiped it alight and put the flame to the wick. He eased the globe chimney back on and adjusted the wick before he turned.

"Come on in," he said.

The string-thin man lounged into the room and put his hat on the floor. "Thought maybe I could talk better comin' out here," he said.

"Had supper?" Sam asked.

Cooney nodded. "Et before I left camp," he said.

"I'm going to fix a bite," Sam said. "Talk away, Cooney."

Cooney stared at him. "Been tanglin' with a wildcat?" he asked.

"We all have our troubles," Sam said, and began building a fire in the cook stove. When he had it blazing he clattered the stove lid into place and fanned the smoke from around his head.

"Seems you have more than your share, from what I hear."

"Quit beating around the bush," Sam said. "Tell me what you want." The stove was heating and he put the coffeepot on and broke two eggs in a frying pan and placed a cover over them. He turned and let his glance rest on Cooney.

"All right, I will. I don't want trouble but I got to get my cows settled on that range. I brung 'em a right far piece."

"I can't give you permission," Sam said.

"Yeah, but you can stay out o' any fight that might start."

Sam studied him. "You think there'll be a fight?"

Cooney slowly uncoiled himself and stood up from the chair he had taken. "Kenton will have one. But he's afraid o' you. With you out o' it I might have a chance."

Sam laughed. "Kenton afraid of me? Who's been feeding you that stuff?"

"I see things by lookin' around," Cooney said. "You're a reasonable feller, I know. You're big as Kenton—"

Sam interrupted. "I can't do a damn thing about it," he said flatly. Cooney hadn't moved his cattle into the valley or he wouldn't be here now. He suddenly wished Texas John had gone somewhere else to resettle.

"Maybe you can't," Cooney said. "That'd be bad. There's a bunch o' farmers waitin' around here to claim some land. Maybe I'll he'p 'em along, though God knows I don't want 'em bustin' sod any more than you do."

"This land's all taken."

"So's mine down in Texas," Cooney said bleakly. "But I got no more right to it than a hound dog has to heaven. I'm askin' you for the last time: stand back and call off the others. I'll take care o' Kenton."

"There's nothing I can do," Sam said with finality.

"All right, then," Cooney said and his eyes grew hot. "Don't blame me for anythin' that happens." He stepped to the door, jerked it open and said, "Boys!"

The dark, wide man came first and he had a pistol in his hand and there was something of Marv Teller's eagerness about him. The other two also had their pistols out. They came swiftly across the room while Harden stood there wishing he had a gun.

"What's the deal, Cooney?" Sam asked; with the three guns on him a helpless feeling held him tight.

"I'm takin' you with me," Cooney said. "I'll hold you out in my camp 'til I get m' cows settled where I aim to put 'em."

Nothing to lose, Sam thought. *They'll kill me anyway.* "Like hell," he said. His elbow jammed the gun aside and he smashed a rock-hard fist into the dark Texan's stomach and doubled him up. His left slid past Brad's chin and slammed into the man's windpipe. Brad fell helplessly to the floor, gagging for breath.

"Don't shoot 'im!" Cooney screeched.

Sam whirled as one of Cooney's men dropped a hammer. Sam reached for him and the gun frame slammed into his head. The room exploded in lights and the floor suddenly tilted and he was on his hands and knees, shaking his head and groaning.

He shook his head again and saw Brad struggling to his feet with a murderous rage twisting his face. The squat, dark man came over on one knee and slammed his gun at Sam's head. Sam couldn't bring up enough strength to duck it and another explosion rocked him into darkness.

XI

A GROAN was wrenched out of Sam with the pain that seemed to split his head apart. He tried to steady himself, to ease the jolting. He realized that he was riding his own horse. A man rode on either side of him and they kept him from falling from the saddle by pushing him back when he teetered from one side to the other. Not that he'd fall very far if they let him go. His legs were tied under the horse's belly.

It all came back to him with a rush. "Cooney," he said, not recognizing the croak as his own voice.

A rider ahead drifted back when one of the men beside Sam called out.

Cooney said sympathetically, "You comin' 'round?"

Sam didn't answer. His head was clearing and he looked around to get his bearings. The mountains were there, lined against the sky, and from their silhouette he knew they were out of Squaw Valley.

It suddenly occurred to him that maybe he could capitulate; tell Cooney the truth about Kenton. Have them pool their resources to fight off whatever it was Kenton was trying to do. He looked at Cooney's hard-jutting jaw and decided to wait.

Early-morning gray was all around them. Mists silvered the peaks in the distance when the sound of bawling cattle reached Sam. They broke out of cover and Sam saw the herd, held in a crook of the near-dry river; he saw the broad trail they made, grazing slowly up the valley.

The riders angled down toward where blue smoke from the fire behind the chuckwagon drifted slowly upward. Two men sat hunkered on the ground, eating from tin plates. The cook moved between the fire and the tailgate. Sam saw two riders out circling the herd. A crew of eight men, counting Cooney, plus the cook. It was hard to believe such a small crew had brought this size herd from Texas.

All of them dismounted except Harden. He sat his horse until Cooney came over and began untying the rope that held his legs under his mount's belly. The others gave him a spare glance and paid no further attention to him.

"I sure hated to do this," Cooney said candidly. "I jus' don't know no other way."

"It'll not help you any," Sam said.

"Well, maybe. Get down and have a bite to eat."

Sam threw a long leg over his saddle horn and slipped

to the ground. He almost fell, hanging on to his saddle.

The three men accompanying Cooney fell to eating voraciously, not paying any attention to Sam. Cooney brought Sam a plate of beans and a couple of sourdough biscuits and a tin cup of coffee. "It ain't what you started to have but it'll keep your belly from cavin' in," he said.

The three men finished eating, mounted, and went out to the herd, and with the two on guard duty began cutting out a sizable bunch. Sam guessed there were five hundred head in the herd they separated from the main bunch. This smaller group headed out of the valley and the two cowboys began circling the main herd again.

Sam saw then that the bedroll wagon was piled high with soogans. He counted ten and estimated that many out of sight. That meant Cooney had twice as many men as were in sight. He wondered where the others were.

While Sam was eating Cooney rummaged in his war bag and brought out a Colt pistol and gave it to the cook. Looking at Sam, he spoke to the cook. "You know what we're doin', Stump. Don't let him go no place."

Stump shoved the pistol in his waist band, nodded, and went on about his camp chores. Cooney mounted his horse and sat there for a moment looking at Sam. "We'll turn you loose when this is done," he said.

Sam shook his head. "I don't know what you're planning, but I'm betting it won't work."

Cooney suddenly grinned. "It'll work. I got most my men staked out around Crazyhorse. I'm runnin' this bunch in to see if Kenton's gonna jump me. He does and my men jump him. We'll settle this once and for all." He touched his horse with spurs and rode after the smaller herd now dipping into a land undulation.

Sitting there with a growing sense of urgency, Sam speculated on his next move. He owed Kenton nothing, but to let him ride into a trap was unthinkable. He had many

things to do, none of which could be done while he was a prisoner in Cooney's cow camp.

Six feet separated him from the cook where the man squatted cleaning the bean pot. He speculated on his chances of jumping Stump while the man was busy. He hesitated; a better chance might come later. Yet it might not; he leaped from his sitting position, snatching at the pistol in Stump's belt. The pistol snagged and Stump, though surprised, struck at him with the bean pot and hit his shoulder. It was a numbing blow that sent him sprawling but he got the pistol. Stump was after him with the pot raised for another and finishing smash. Sam thrust the pistol up, cocking it. The spare metallic sound stopped the cook dead in his tracks, pot still upraised.

Scrambling to his feet, Sam headed for his horse, feeling sick and dizzy. He got the horse untied and mounted, keeping Stump covered. "I'll leave your gun in town at The Mint," he said. "Tell Cooney to turn back or he's in big trouble."

He raked the horse into a dead run, heading in the general direction of Crossroad Corners. He had no definite plans but town seemed to be the first stop. If he couldn't find Jesse Kenton there he'd have to get a fresh horse and ride on to the J Bar K. He didn't relish the idea; he'd been tired before but never this tired, never this hurt.

It was past ten o'clock by the clock in the bank window when he rode down the main street on a lathered, exhausted horse. The wind had risen and dust swept skyward in sheets, a brown pall that darkened the land. The streets were deserted except for a few horses huddled together at the rack in front of The Mint. It seemed to Sam that the town was a dead, uninhabited place.

Sam dismounted in front of the hotel, looped the reins over the rail and walked into the empty lobby. He headed toward the ground floor rooms of the McGees, realizing that

he was a hard-looking figure. His dark beard had grown for two or three days, giving his features a glowering quality. His clothes were dirty and torn and stained with his blood. He was covered with sweat-mixed dust that made muddy streaks at his armpits and collar.

He tapped on the door and heard the rapid footsteps within. The door swung open. She stared up at him, surprise washing over her smooth face.

"Sam!" She put out her hands and took his two hands and drew him into the room. "I—I didn't expect you. You've heard, then?"

Sam stared at her blankly for a moment, seeing something unusual in her face. "Heard what?" he asked and a sudden chill ran through him, leaving him cold and expectant.

"Dick," she said chokingly and started to cry. "He was shot and killed this morning."

XII

A NUMBING doubt, coupled with a coldness in his veins, hit him like a sledgehammer. Then an almost unbearable sense of loss was followed swiftly by memories he made no effort to put down.

Molly had regained her composure as she related what had happened. At an early hour, shortly after dawn, she heard a voice calling Dick. She didn't recognize the voice. She went through the lobby and peered from the window.

There were two men out there on horses. No one else was in sight. The town still slept.

She heard Dick answer from an upstairs window and then the flame and shot. The two horsemen wheeled and galloped away. Cherry was screaming that Dick had been shot.

"They were just dark shapes, Sam. I didn't recognize either of them."

He listened to her voice with a dull-wittedness in him. When she finished there was silence. He sat there, his hands slack on his knees, thinking of Dick as a little kid, as a boy, as a young man. His sense of loss deepened, knotting his guts and choking his throat.

Doc Sawyer appeared and scolded Sam for self-neglect. Sam sat woodenly as the doctor worked on him, reproaching him. Sam made no answer, remembering all the things that make up the life of two boys, two young men, close as blood ties can make them, growing up together, with Sam always the leader and Dick contesting him as he grew older. He was older than Dick, had taught him to ride and shoot and rope and swim. The old man, their father, had been too busy for anything but the ranch. Sam had helped Dick select his first saddle, given him his first gun, an old Remington cap-and-ball. He loaned him money when he began seeing the girls.

Sam felt an added ache in his chest as he thought of the questions Dick used to ask. Where do the geese go when they fly south? Why are coyotes wild, and can you tame them to be hunting dogs? How does a gun shoot?

The pain sharpened and he tried to put the memories away in self-defense.

"Sam, you'd done what I told you, maybe none of this would have happened."

"Oh, Doc, leave him alone!" cried Molly.

Doc Sawyer took his bag and went away, looking injured.

Molly brought him coffee and a piece of pie. Some people—

afterwards he didn't remember just who it was—came to McGee's rooms, stood before him momentarily, mumbled something and left.

He came out of his numbed lassitude. "Guess I'd better take care of my horse."

"Ora Ketterman took it to the barn," Molly said. "Oh, Sam, why don't you lie down on Fill's bed and get some rest?"

He looked at her and smiled. But the smile wasn't reflected in his dark eyes. He wondered why it was that women always insisted that a man eat or rest, no matter what happened. He shook his head and got to his feet. "No. I've got a few things to do. I want to see Cherry first."

"The doctor gave her something," Molly said. "I'll see if she's awake." She went out of the room and returned in a few moments. "She's awake but not very clear-headed, Sam. Why don't you go on up?"

He made his way up the stairs and it seemed like a long time had passed since he'd tapped on this door as he was doing now. He heard no reply; he turned the knob and pushed the door open.

The shades were drawn and the room was in semi-darkness. She sat sideways on a chair, looking at the wall.

"Cherry," he said.

She turned her head and looked at him. Then she came to her feet and ran to him, clutching at him, burying her face on his chest, shaking with sobs.

He awkwardly patted her shoulder, feeling the lump thicken in his throat, his chest feeling so full it pained him. "Kenton's back of this," he said. "I'll settle it for both of us."

"That . . . that . . . won't bring Dick back."

"No."

"Sam! You scare me! Why, you could g-g-get k-k-killed, too!"

He said, in a cold and measured voice, "That's the only

way he'll stop me." He gently pushed her away from him. "Don't worry about anything, Cherry. You're my sister now. I'll take care of you."

She didn't seem to hear him. "Kenton, that evil man! What I could tell you about him. He—he was responsible for my brother being killed—and now my husband. He's capable of anything, Sam."

"I know all about it," Sam said. "Rest, Cherry and try not to grieve. I'll be back soon."

"Be careful," she whispered after him.

Molly seemed to be waiting for him. She asked in a worried voice, "What can you say to Kenton?"

"I can tell him that if he tries to stop Texas John Cooney he'll be wiped out."

"You'll warn him?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded. "And after that I have a few personal things to tell him."

The street was deserted of people when Sam walked steadily toward The Mint. Horses tied to the rail in front of the saloon humped their hindquarters into the wind. His boots pounded the wooden walk and he breasted the batwings and surged inside.

All talk stopped when he entered the room. He stood there for a moment, feeling the raw hate that ate at him. Behind the bar, Leo raised a hand, unsmiling, giving a significant glance down the bar where Kenton toyed with a glass. Clay Bassett, wearing the star, leaned against the mahogany beside Kenton.

Sam headed straight for the bar where Leo was pouring a drink from the special bottle. The murmur of voices resumed on a lower key.

"Sam," Leo said in a subdued voice. "Sorry about Dick." Then he leaned across the bar and murmured, "They're all set to go bear hunting, just getting warmed up."

"Who they after, Cooney or the farmers?"

"Both if you ask me. Jesse's playing for keeps. That was a fine thing you done, Sam, trying to save poor ol' Reno."

"Pour me another one, Leo. That was pretty good. You seen Marv Teller?"

Leo shook his head. "On a drunk, I think."

"They say he goes on a bender every time he kills a man."

"I've heard that, too. I don't know, Sam. Have another drink?"

"That's enough," Sam said and walked down the bar to where Jesse Kenton stood. He didn't wait for Kenton to finish what he was saying to Bassett. "I don't know why I'm telling you, Jesse," he said, "but you go after Cooney and you'll lose it."

The ready alertness on Kenton's high-colored face didn't change. "You're still alive, Sam," he said evenly. "Why don't you stay out of this?"

"I think I'm doing you a favor," Sam answered. "Cooney's all set for you, Jesse. You ride out there and just a few will come back."

"All right, you warned me. Now, get the hell out of here, Sam. If you—"

"You wait for me to finish," Sam said softly. "A lot has happened lately, like somebody bushwhacking me and trying again with a shotgun trap. Like Reno being hung and George Balfont missing. Now my brother Dick. You know what I think? I think Marv Teller knows a lot about all of it, Jesse. Just one question: did you put him up to it?"

"You're a pushy young puke," Jesse answered. "Why don't you dig a hole and crawl in it and pull it in after you?"

"I've lost a lot here lately and I think it all runs back to you."

"You're all talk, just like your old man—" He stopped talking and his hand flashed to his gun as anger overcame him.

Sam hit him, hard enough to glaze his eyes and cause him to drop the gun. He hit him again, a sound like a brittle board breaking, driving him into one of his cowhands. Kenton pushed himself free and ran forward, ramming his head into Sam's belly and trying to wrestle him to the floor.

The men around stood open-mouthed as Sam broke loose and rained a flurry of blows to Kenton's face and stomach, bloodying him, driving him across the room and into a card table that toppled. Reaching down, a deadly rage possessing him, he dragged Kenton to his feet and grabbed his coat collar. With his other hand in the slack of Kenton's pants he propelled him toward the door. He used Kenton as a battering ram to thrust open the doors and sent him plunging headlong into the street.

He went through the door with a loose-muscled walk and heard a woman scream. He turned toward the sound of terror as Marv Teller came out of the alley with his six-gun leveled. Sam drew his own gun and dropped to one knee as Teller fired. He steadied his pistol, drew back the hammer with his thumb and fired deliberately as Teller emptied his gun. Sam missed and his apparent deliberateness rattled Teller who turned and pounded toward the alley. Sam fired again as Teller wheeled and ran. It seemed to Sam that a giant hand thrust Teller forward and he plunged headlong into the alley entrance.

Sam walked slowly forward and kicked the pistol away from Teller's outflung hand. He squatted and looked at the gunman. His bullet had caught him just below and to the right of the left shoulder blade. Teller was dead.

Kenton stood among the men who'd scrambled out of The Mint. His face was puffed and bloody. His men were awed by his downfall and none of them spoke. Suddenly Kenton got his speech back. "Arrest him, Clay!" he roared. "He shot Marv Teller in the back! Arrest him, dammit!"

Sam heard and rose, turning and walked toward Kenton. He saw the man back away and then Clay Bassett thrust a gun in his back and said "Drop the gun, Sam."

Sam stopped dead still. "Don't be stupid, Clay," he said.

"By God, you'd better lock him up," Kenton panted between battered lips. "He—"

"It's easy to see Marv was shot in the back" Clay said but his voice was uncertain. "He was drunk, Sam, I know for a fact. Get goin'. I wouldn't want to have to kill you."

Standing at the window of the hotel, Molly watched as Clay Bassett walked behind Sam toward the county jail. There was a white line around her mouth and her face was pinched with worry.

Throughout the day Kenton kept to himself in the back room of The Mint, pacing up and down the cramped room, smoking one cigar after another. Now and then he poured a half tumbler of whiskey and downed it. Like most arrogant men of power he was finding bitterness in the physical defeat Sam Harden had handed him.

He had been humbled in front of his men, before the town people. His rage bubbled when he thought about it and he pictured all manners of torture for Sam Harden, the man who had brought it about.

He was in the act of lighting another cigar when he heard a tap on the door. He crossed the room and yanked the door open. It was Cannonball Buford, a tall, slim man of forty with frosty blue eyes, a hooked nose and mouse-colored hair. He was Teller's one and only friend.

Buford slapped his hat against his thigh and said, "Boss, them Injuns are primed. Breed Catlow went with 'em, to make certain they didn't stop along the way."

Kenton's eyes glistened with satisfaction. "They'll hit the farmers' camp in the grove? You're sure of that?"

"Breed's got that young chief under his thumb. He's more Injun than the Injuns. He'll keep things goin', Boss."

"Fine." Kenton rolled his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "You heard Marv got it?"

"Yeah." Buford's blue eyes seemed to lighten. "I guess it's all right if I kill Sam Harden."

"That's too easy," Kenton said. "When we get back from taking care of John Cooney I'm going to hang Sam Harden from the highest tree."

The man considered this in silence. Then he grudgingly nodded. "All right. If that's how you want it." He licked his lips. "All I want is to see him dead."

"You'll see that," Kenton promised. "The men all ready?"

"All ready. All o' them."

Kenton touched his puffy, purple face. "Let's ride, then," he said curtly.

XIII

SAM HARDEN didn't really start thinking until the key clicked in the lock of the jail cell door and Clay stood outside looking in at him. The smirk on Clay's face got through to him.

He gripped the bars with his hands until his knuckles whitened. "Do you know what the hell you're doing?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Clay hung the iron loop holding the key on a nail in the wall. "Yup," he said. He hadn't done much of anything

since becoming sheriff except ride back and forth between the grove and town. It was good to show off to Hannah Evans. It was even better to be able to put a man in jail, especially a big shot like Sam Harden. He didn't think much about whether it was right or wrong. He was simply enjoying it.

"Listen, Clay, you silly bastard," Sam said. "You saw that gunfight. I didn't shoot him in the back on purpose. I was pulling the trigger when he turned and ran."

"Always knew there was a yella streak in him," Clay observed as he rolled a cigarette. He licked the cylinder into shape and twisted the end and stuck it in his mouth. He lighted it, looking at Sam through a haze of blue smoke. "Tough luck, Sam. You gonna have to stay here 'til the circuit judge comes back."

"He just left," Sam said, struggling to keep from shouting. "He won't be back for a month."

Clay was nodding. "He swore me in and left town. They got a murder case over in Tomahawk."

"There's more than one right here in Crossroad Corners," Sam muttered savagely. "My brother for one."

"I mean they got the murderer over there," Clay said. "No use to get all steamed up, Sam. I hated to do it but I got my job same as you."

"You love every damn minute of it," Sam yelled. He cut short a stream of invective as the door opened and Molly came in with a cloth-covered basket in her hand. Her shoulders were straight and her free arm was stiff at her side, hidden in the folds of her skirt.

"Open that cell door, Clay Bassett," she said with spirit. "Sam hasn't had anything to eat for two days and I've brought him something."

Clay dropped his cigarette on the floor and ground it out with his boot heel. "Why, sure, Molly," he said affably, swaggering toward her. "I'll have to take a look in that basket

and see you're not sneaking him a six-gun. Or a hacksaw." He chuckled at his own humor.

Molly placed the basket on the littered desk. "Look all you please," she invited.

Clay lifted the corner of the cloth and leaned down to peer in. Molly brought her hand from the folds of her skirt and Sam saw that she held a rolling pin. She brought it up over her head with both hands, stood on her toes for leverage, and brought it down on Clay's head with all her strength. Clay dropped like a felled tree and lay still while his hat rolled across the floor.

Molly marched to the wall and got the cell door key and walked steadily to where Sam stood open-mouthed and unlocked the door.

"My God!" Sam said in awe.

She looked at him wide-eyed. "Hurry, Sam, your horse is in back. A fresh one. Food in the saddlebags."

He stared back. "Pretty rough way to get out of jail," he said.

"I—I guess so. I had to do it, Sam. Jesse Kenton's riding out with all his men to fight John Cooney. When they get back they mean to hang you. Fill heard them talking in The Mint."

Sam stepped over Clay's body and got his pistol from the desk drawer. He holstered it and turned toward the back door and then came swiftly back to Molly and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Thanks, Molly," he said softly. "Thanks for everything."

She caught his hand and pressed it against her cheek. "Be careful, Sam," she whispered and he went out. She watched him ride away from the back window and when he was out of sight she hurried out the door of the jail without looking at Clay Bassett stretched on the floor.

It had taken Sam more than two hours under a lowering cloud cover to work out of the valley, heading for the cover

of timber. He walked his horse most of the time to save the animal's strength. Once in the pine and brush cover he crossed one ridge after another, pausing only to eat cold bacon and biscuits Molly had thoughtfully put in his saddlebags. After that he kept going, drifting mostly north, keeping the valley in sight on his left but himself hidden from anyone riding down below.

In late afternoon the overcast began breaking up. Long streamers of gold sunlight lanced to the ground and the wind pushed against him. He gave a cynical grunt at the vagrant thought that a storm was coming, bringing either rain or snow. That hope and prayer he'd held for so long seemed unimportant; yet he knew it would provide an answer of sorts. He simply had lost all power to make a wishful thought.

It was nearly night when he turned back toward the valley. Somewhere down there Cooney had his trap all set for Jesse Kenton. He was disturbed at his ambivalence; he was equally disturbed at not being able to make a decision on his action. Certainly he owed Kenton nothing but whatever trouble he could give him. Kenton, to a large measure, was responsible for everything that had happened to him lately.

He put all these thoughts away because there was no point in thinking about them. What lay ahead of him he couldn't guess. In a vague way he thought that if he could keep Kenton alive the man might feel obligated to blow up his own dam and join him in bringing peace to the country. Sam knew suddenly that Fill McGee was right: the settlers could help save their herds. It meant bringing them into the life of the country, and, while Sam felt some reluctance at changing the established order, he knew it was inevitable. The knowledge was bitter but he accepted it.

The wind was slacking when Sam rode the horse around a barn-sized crumbling gray boulder and came on a steep

slope dropping away into the valley. He abruptly stopped the horse, sitting motionless in his saddle, staring.

Down in the far distance of the valley riders appeared, emerging from the dark shadows of the trees, riding south. Sam counted them: twenty-one braves in a Crow war party.

In his mind he made a quick calculation of time and distance. The war party would hit McGee's grove at dawn. He didn't try to reason why he knew the destination of the war party. He simply put his horse in the direction that would permit his arrival at the grove before the farmers were attacked. That is, he would make it if the Crow made a night halt.

It was near morning when Sam spotted the glowing embers of camp fires in the grove. He got off the tired horse and it put its head down, standing spraddle-legged in exhaustion. He walked on, carrying his rifle in the crook of his arm. The sky was just graying in the east when he came into the trees and reached the first wagon.

"Hey, there!" A man stepped down from the wagon carrying a shotgun. "Just hold it there, mister!"

Another man came from around the wagon. It was Pop Evans. He reached out and shoved the shotgun down. "Don't get hasty, Art," he said and stepped toward Sam.

"Crow war party," Sam said. "They'll hit you any minute now."

"How many?" Evans asked in a sick voice.

"I counted twenty-one. They may have picked up more braves on the way."

"What is it, Pop?" A woman's voice called sleepily from the darkness beyond the wagon.

Evans looked in that direction and swiveled his head back to Sam. "How—how much time we got?"

"I told you . . . they'll hit any minute. You'd better get all your people up—"

"It's a damn trick," the man called Art said without con-

viction. "They'd like us to get outta here, outta the country. Anything to get us stirred up, scared and runnin'. To hell with it. I'm goin' back to bed." He turned away.

Evans called, "No you don't, Art. This man ain't like them others."

Art stopped and turned slowly. "He's the one hit McWharter, ain't he? Near killed him with a pistol, I recollect."

"Mac asked for it. Now git on, rouse everybody."

A child cried fretfully somewhere in the early dawn. The wind had died away and a stillness was on the land. The mountains to the east were rimmed with gold. A camp robber flew to the ground and began searching for a discarded morsel. Art, his broad red face revealed in the brightening light, said resignedly, "All right, I'll call 'em," and turned away.

"I don't know nothin' about Indian fightin'," Evans said. "They'll hit and run—unless they see they can finish the job."

Evans forced a laugh. "Well, you gonna take charge or what?"

"I hadn't thought about it. First thing to do is get the men stationed out of sight but ready to shoot."

The farmers were collecting now, a motley group of all ages, shapes and sizes. "All here, Art?" Evans called.

"All but Clevenger. He's comin' soon's his wife puts a new dressin' on his foot.

"Clevenger hit his foot with an axe," Evans said. "Infected." A man limped up to the circle. "All here, now." In a few words he explained to the men that the Crow were rising up, were heading for their camp in the grove.

"They'll be here any minute," he said. He put his hand on Sam's arm. "Mr. Harden'll tell us what to do."

They looked at Sam.

"First thing is to circle the grove—"

"I only got a dozen cartridges," a man interrupted.

My God, Sam thought. *They'll never make it.* "Maybe that'll do. We put up a good fight right off, they'll not push it. Get out there and don't shoot until you see an Indian shooting at you or making a threatening move with a lance or bow and arrow. Likely, they'll bunch in that gully to the east. Those of you on the west move to the east side if the shooting starts there. Likewise, you staked on the east move if they attack from the west."

"I'm hungry," someone said.

"We'll take turns eating," Sam answered. "Just a few at a time. It'll be coffee and not much else until this is over."

The men moved out to take stations and the women began making a hasty breakfast. The children remained in the wagons. Sam and Evans squatted beside the only fire Sam permitted. The sun came up. The men moved in by twos, ate silently, and moved out again. The long shadows shortened.

Evans said, "Looks like they're not comin'," in a relieved voice. At that moment faint sounds of firing reached them. Sam jumped to his feet, staring.

"The town," he said. "They're hitting the town!"

Fillmore McGee walked out the back door of the hotel and sauntered across the space between the hotel and the corral. Charlie, the black buggy horse, trotted to the fence and poked his blaze-faced head over the top rail and whickered softly.

McGee walked slowly, his hands jammed deep in his pockets until he came to the pole fence. He leaned against it. Charlie nudged at him, wanting one of the bits of sugar, apple, or carrot that McGee habitually carried.

He absently rubbed Charlie's velvet nose and then straightened as Clay Bassett came swinging down the alley. There was something meaningful in Clay's stride. When McGee saw him come on purposefully he knew what to ex-

pect. He straightened his shoulders and stepped toward Clay, a small dread working its way into his stomach.

Bassett came on, his deepset gray eyes unfriendly. "Dammit, Fill, I'm gonna have to arrest Molly. It's agin the law to let a prisoner loose."

McGee was silent.

On the main street a farmer stopped at the alleyway and watched them. Another joined him, and then another. Soon a small group of men stood there, silent, waiting.

"Say somethin'," Clay said angrily.

McGee didn't answer. He kept his eyes on Bassett's face, trying to shape the words to fit his thoughts.

And then something happened. McGee was to say later that he thought he was having a nightmare in broad daylight when he heard the wild yells of the Crow and the rapid fire of a six-gun on the far end of town.

Clay Bassett turned and ran toward the street, awkward in his high heeled boots. McGee was right behind him. They both plunged through the group of men and stopped dead in their tracks.

"Godda mighty!" Clay whispered.

The street was full of Indians. They made a wild sweep down the street, screaming, dealing death right and left. They wheeled in a tangle of horseflesh at the south end of town and returned. Bassett saw a farmer go down with a lance in his chest. The lance flipped up, the feathers on the shaft fluttering in the breeze. The stunned men began firing at the Indians.

McGee ran toward the hotel for his shotgun. Bassett followed him, walking backward slowly, firing his pistol as he backstepped and he was thinking that maybe he'd never see Hannah Evans again. He wished he had Sam Harden there to tell him what to do.

XIV

SAM'S WINDED horse had regained its strength. He mounted and pointed the animal toward town. "All of you get horses and come along," he shouted. He saw then, with a shock, that the men were standing there, staring at him.

"Get moving!" he said. "Don't just stand there."

"We ain't lost nothin' in Crossroad Corners," Evans drawled.

"You're a white man. That's white men—and women and children—those Indians are shooting at!"

"We ain't gonna go off and leave our families and property unprotected."

Sam didn't feel that he had time to argue with them. He lashed his horse into a dead run and left them standing there staring after him.

He came into the town and found it empty of Indians except for a few dead ones here and there. He slowed his again-faltering horse to a walk, his heart hammering, his thoughts on Molly. A few people moved among the dead and wounded. He saw two old men carrying Ora Ketterman's body into the hotel. He caught a glimpse of Molly holding the door open and he called.

She ran to him, her face drained of color. He jumped down and held her, feeling the rapid beat of her heart.

She shivered, holding on to him. "They—they came like wildfire . . . all painted, screaming and shooting. . . ." She looked wildly up at him. "But why are you here?"

"I saw them," he said "The Indians. I thought they'd hit the camp in the grove. But they came here instead."

"Clay and all the able-bodied men went after them," she said. "We need help, Sam. So many wounded . . ."

"I'll find Doc. You do what you can for them and I'll be along later."

She felt better now that Sam was here. She felt secure for some reason she didn't bother to fathom. She hugged him briefly and ran back into the hotel.

The street, usually quiet and peaceful, looked as if a cyclone had struck. A wagon was overturned in front of the livery, the team that had pulled it dead in their harness. Ike Newman, a crippled man who worked for Ketterman, lay dead beside the watering trough.

Doc Sawyer sat on the porch floor against the front wall of The Mint, staring at a dead savage at his feet. He motioned feebly to Sam.

Sam approached the doctor and saw that he was holding his chest; blood seeped out through his fingers. Sam knelt beside him.

"Ain't it awful, Sam?" he whispered. "You killed the wrong man, son. It should have been Kenton you put that bullet in." He toed the dead Indian at his feet. "Ever see him before?"

Sam looked through the fixity of death, and the paint, and felt a flicker of recognition. "Breed. He used to work for Kenton."

"Still does, Sam Or did till he caught that bullet. Kenton set up that raid, fed them liquor, gave them guns. S'posed to massacre the farmers. Hit the town instead."

"Let me get you to the hotel," Sam said running his arm under Doc's knees and sliding an arm around his shoulder. "Molly'll take care—"

"No. I'm done for. Self-diagnosis, Sam." He coughed and red bubbles appeared on his lip. "Kenton . . . I lied about Liz Porter, Sam. Kenton . . . was the man who . . ." His

head rolled to one side. He went limp with the stillness of death.

Sam supervised the removal of seven wounded men to the hotel, burning his raging hate in action. He led a detail that carried the dead to the cooling room in The Mint. These numbered eight. Five Indians had been killed, as well as three horses and a yoke of oxen. By four o'clock in the afternoon the street began to look as it did before the attack.

Pausing for a moment, Sam watched a farmer stop his horse. The horse was harnessed and dragging a singletree. The farmer had just returned from dragging a dead animal away from the town. He wiped his sweating face and turned red-rimmed eyes to Sam. "This town is finished," he said with finality.

"The land's still here," Sam said and he knew Kenton would return to claim that land. An eagerness rose in him for that meeting as he wheeled and walked toward The Mint, needing a drink badly, forgetting for the moment that Leo Maury was in the hotel with an arrow in his belly. He knew he shouldn't be looking for a drink at this time but he was full of explosive tension that had been building for a long period of time. And the cause of all of it was his continuing encounters with Jesse Kenton.

He wondered now about the qualities of a man that made him act as Kenton did in seeking dominion over men and land. Was the fervor for land like that some men have for gold, money, for power? Or the passion for a woman? Where had he himself gone wrong? Had he made a mistake in not listening to Kenton, perhaps even pooling his strength with the man for whatever it was he planned? He discarded this almost without thought. Kenton had made too many moves that went against Sam's grain. Sam tried to recapture his feeling of awe of Kenton, such as when Sam was a spindly kid and Kenton a grown man, a powerful man whom everybody looked to for leadership and guidance.

He couldn't conjure up the old image.

Sam stopped before the door of the saloon, deep in thought, eyes studying the town that was almost normal again as far as outward appearances were concerned. The decision came to him full-blown that when Kenton returned he'd face him, have it out once and for all.

Then the gut-wrenching cry rang out. "The Injuns! They're hittin' again!"

XV

THE SUN was higher and hotter when Kenton led his men into the Crazyhorse, through a low saddle, bare of trees or cover of any sort. In the far distance a herd was strung out in a long, thin line, with the higher shapes of the herders on point, outriding, dust hiding the drag riders.

He stopped his crew with a wave of his hand, drew his pistol, and inspected it for full loads.

"They don't act like they expect trouble," Kenton said without turning his head. "Let's not let a one of them get away." After a moment, he said, "Them people had a chance to go back where they come from. They askin' for whatever we hand 'em. It's enough to make a man sick at his belly but I'm holdin' on to what's mine come hell or high water. Let's go get 'em."

He led out and his riders followed. They fanned out as they rode, heading directly for the herd at full gallop. Kenton felt a rising sense of power tinged with joy at the

impending action. He forgot momentarily his puffed face and injured pride. He was a man in motion, fighting to keep what he had and to get more to add to it. It was almost like being with Liz Porter, he thought, and wondered again how a full-bodied woman like that could erase the magic of life with a pistol. And one, by God, he'd given her himself. Then he put all that out of his mind.

Ahead of them the dark shape of the herders suddenly cut away toward the distant river. It seemed to Kenton that they moved on signal. He dug in his spurs and shouted, "Hurry or they'll get away!"

It was then that the line of trees on their left and on their right seemed to erupt. A wild glance over his shoulder showed men toppling from the saddle. His own horse went down and Kenton, kicking his feet free of the stirrups, sailed bodily over the horse's ears. He struck the ground with a great thump and lay still, immobilized. He was not conscious but paralyzed, unable to move. He felt the earth shake with the sound of many hoofs and the burst of gunfire. He tried to rise but the thrashing ironshod hoofs of a maddened horse knocked him rolling. He heard shouts, curses, and then more shooting. Sudden quiet descended following the receding beat of running horses fading, dying completely.

With a mighty effort he struggled to his knees, staring. A few riderless horses drifted here and there, aimlessly, reins dragging.

Of all the men who rode into the valley only he, Jesse Kenton, remained alive. He staggered to his feet and walked erratically toward a horse, his mind recoiling from this utter defeat. He remembered Sam Harden's warning: *You tackle John Cooney and not many of your men will come back.* He looked at the bodies, still in death. The powder smell lingered in the dry air. Cooney's men had killed and run. He realized now the riddle of the small herd. Cooney had deliberately set a trap for him. He caught the dangling

reins of a horse and as he started to mount he heard a weak cry.

He took his foot out of the stirrup and turned. Cannonball Buford struggled up on one elbow. Blood streaked his face from a head wound and a large round spot of crimson showed above his belt buckle. He said in a plaintive voice, "They suckered us, boss, jus' like we was a bunch o' dudes."

The words triggered Kenton's blind rage. He grabbed the saddle horn and swung to the back of the horse, yanking it around and setting his spurs.

"Wait, boss, wait!" Buford called weakly, trying to get to his feet. He knew he was dying and didn't want to be left alone.

Kenton never faltered. He spurred and whipped the horse in frenzied rage. He'd planned but not well enough. Every way he turned there was Sam Harden, big, hard, and competent, barring his way. The man didn't seem to be half-trying when he struck aside everything Kenton tried to do. True, Kenton had signed reciprocal agreements with Reno Milser and George Balfont that gave the surviving members of the trio possession of quit-claim deeds to the other's land rights; but he'd never been able to even bring the subject up with Sam Harden. Now, in an unreasoning engulfing blanket of hate he blamed Harden for everything. No matter that Sam had tried to warn him. If anything, that made matters worse.

He had one blazing goal in his head: to find Sam Harden and kill him.

XVI

After the first wild assault was beaten off the citizens of Crossroad Corners barricaded themselves in the hotel. Men crouched at all the upstairs windows while refugee women and children waited in the inside rooms in agonizing fear.

The Crow followed a different pattern. Instead of filling the street with horsemen they came spaced in ragged single file. They broke off and circled the main business section killing everything that moved in their path, including Mrs. Wheeler's beagle. Then they retired, separating to take cover in a gully, a dry creek bed, and the town's outhouses. There they kept up a shower of arrows, some of them tipped with fire, firing their weapons with an abandon that indicated they had plenty of powder and lead.

Sam knelt before a window, holding his saddle gun ready, watching the twist in the creek bed where part of them were concealed. Dub Porter squatted beside Sam, a tremendous double-barreled shotgun lying across the sill. It was a muzzle-loader with each bore an inch in diameter.

Sam, wooden-faced, gave no hint of the tension knotting his guts. Porter, as nattily-attired as when he dealt cards, seemed serene and unruffled. The sound of the other men, low-voiced and tense, reached them from time to time.

Porter said, "I'm sorry about George Balfont. I tried to kill him. I found out later he wasn't the man."

"Who told you?" Sam asked without taking his eyes off the creek bed, hoping for a shot.

"Your brother's wife, Cherry. She knew Liz a little better than I did." His voice was touched with bitterness.

"George would like to know that."

"George is dead."

Sam looked at him then, questioning disbelief in his eyes. "Dead?" he echoed.

Porter nodded. "I kept looking for him. I wanted to kill him. Then I found his body. He was in the timber above the ranch, shot in the back."

Sam hit the window sill with his clenched fist.

"I don't know who did it," Porter continued. "But it must have happened the same night I made my play. Or early next morning." He looked searchingly at Sam. "I kept close to town after that, looking, listening, waiting. Sure enough, when the circuit judge come to town and swore Clay in as sheriff, there was Jesse Kenton with a piece of paper."

"Papers?"

"A quit-claim deed signed by Reno giving Kenton any claim he had to land he used to run cattle on. He got everything that belonged to Reno, Sam."

The enormity of Jesse Kenton's malfeasance burst on Sam all at once. The man had lied and cheated and stolen; more than that, he'd betrayed a woman, Dub Porter's daughter, Liz, even as he'd betrayed his own friends and neighbors by damming the Squaw and inciting the Indian uprising.

"Maybe that's the reason George is dead," Sam said flatly.

"Don't forget Reno. Oh, I know the farmers hung him. And you were there, you tried to stop it. But the big guy McWharter, I guess you know him, too."

Sam nodded.

"He was Kenton's man. He stirred the farmers up just like Breed Catlow worked on the Indians. McWharter got the farmers killing mad. He didn't let up for a minute, not until that mob was on its way to Reno's."

An Indian ran across the street and Porter fired the fowling piece, raising a cloud of smoke, shaking the room with the explosion. The Indian pitched headlong into the dust and lay still.

At the end of the street flame and smoke erupted from Dunnigan's Dry Good Store.

"There goes Terry Dunnigan's," Porter said in a dry voice.

"We're going to have to root them out, Dub, or they'll burn the town," Sam said.

"Not enough of us."

"I have an idea." Sam stopped speaking and cradled the butt of his carbine against his shoulder at a flash of color in an alley. He got the Crow warrior in his sights and followed the darting figure across the street, squeezing the trigger after getting a slight lead. The carbine bucked and his shot blasted the stillness. The warrior whirled away with his death yell cut short.

He was levering his rifle for the next shot when three Indians burst from the alley astride war-painted ponies. Everyone on that side of the hotel began shooting but the three ponies with their riders made it across the street.

"What kind of game they up to?" Dub asked in a fretful voice.

An instant later a scream came from the hotel corral.

"They're after the horses," Sam said and rose and walked through the hotel to the back windows that looked out on the barn and corral.

The horses were all bunched at one end of the corral and he saw nothing moving. He heard McGee shouting somewhere below and Molly's voice, pleading.

"They're takin' Charlie," McGee shouted and a door banged somewhere. Sam stopped in midstride, wheeling back to the window. He leaned out and saw McGee's legs pumping away as he headed for the corral.

Sam shouted, "Come back, Fill!" but the man kept going.

An arrow flitted from the barn, grazing McGee's shoulder. He ran heedlessly on.

Sam, continuing to watch the barn, saw two warriors ap-

pear in the wide doorway, their bows drawn. He fired twice before they loosed their arrows, driving them into each other, their bows discharging as they fell in a tangle.

McGee was at the corral gate now, fumbling with the chain that held it. Sam yelled at him again without results.

He heard a sound and turned. Molly stood there with the back of her hand pressed against her mouth, her eyes wide with terror. "He's—he's out there," she said in a strangled voice.

"I'm going to the grove for help," Sam said. "I'll get him back in here before I go."

She stared, her eyes darkening. "You—you're going out there?"

Sam studied the barn door where the two Crow lay. "Yes. We might have slowed them down a little while."

"Sam, Sam, please be careful."

"Now Molly, that's about the most unnecessary advice I ever had," Sam answered, and climbed over the window sill. He dropped the twelve feet to the ground.

He landed hard, letting his legs sink, giving with his weight. He squatted there for a moment, looking around, then ran hard toward McGee who still struggled with the chain.

Sam grabbed McGee and pulled him away from the gate. "Damn it, Fill, you want to get yourself killed?"

McGee turned glazed eyes on Sam. "Charlie," he said. "They're gonna run Charlie off!"

"Where you mean to take him, in the hotel?"

McGee shook his head. "I didn't think," he said. "You know I can't let 'em get Charlie."

"I dunno," Sam said, "but you can stop 'em better from inside the hotel than you can out here." He gave McGee his carbine. "Take this and get back inside to help the others."

"Where you goin'?" McGee asked.

"To the grove and get those farmers to help. Together

we can clean the Crow out of town before they burn us to the ground."

"Then take Charlie," McGee said eagerly. "He can outrun anything on four legs, Sam."

"No. Charlie's a buggy horse, Fill."

"He's any kind o' horse you want him to be. Mostly he's the fastest animal in Montana and you better believe it."

"All right, all right," Sam said impatiently. "Go on back inside and help hold them off."

He squatted against the fence and watched McGee hurry toward the hotel. When he had vanished inside the building, Sam slipped between the poles and pounded toward the small door in the side of the barn. He stopped there, putting his ear to the rough wood, listening. He went on to the door and raised the latch, pushing inward, the rusty hinges groaning. He waited to the count of ten and darted inside, his pistol cocked.

He stood there in the dimness and heard nothing except the stamp of a hoof and the crunching sound of a horse eating hay. He edged out past the partition that was the section of the first stall and looked at the two dead Indians in the wide door. They seemed to be embracing each other. Across the littered open space he saw Charlie's sleek black hindquarters. He darted across the passage and grabbed a bridle from a hook and went on in beside Charlie, talking in a low voice. The horse stopped eating and swung his head inquisitively and then resumed a calm rolling of his jaws. Sam slipped the bit and in a moment had the bridle buckled into place.

He led the big animal out into the passageway and vaulted on the bare back. Charlie snorted and pawed the ground, trying to get his head down.

"No you don't, you son of a gun," Sam muttered, and touched his spurs, lightly. The response was explosive.

Charlie lunged ahead through the doorway and Sam reined

sharp left to run him along the back of the main street buildings. He lay over Charlie's neck, talking speed into the powerful black. At the lower edge of town he heard a volley as guns crashed, a variety of sounds blending, screams and yells accompanying. There was movement here and there and Sam squeezed off a shot at a darting Crow, feeling Charlie flinch and speed up under him at the sound.

A flying wedge of Crow appeared, at right angles to his flight; he emptied his pistol, yelling and spurring Charlie, guiding him toward an opening in the buildings, an alley leading to the main street. He saw a warrior reel from the saddle but the rest of them kept going. Charlie thundered into the alley and Sam met a lone Crow afoot. He used the pistol like a club, parrying the lance thrust and then swinging the gun, slamming it into the painted face, destroying the features and knocking the man back against the wall. Charlie fled on through the alley and emerged on the street.

Sam hauled the horse up short as a caravan appeared in his eyesight. He hastily searched his belt for cartridges and found none. It was a nondescript, rag-tag mob that met his eye. The farmers from the grove, six men in a wagon that had had the cover ripped off it, several afoot, carrying rifles and shotguns, and more mounted on horses of varying sizes, shapes, and colors. The farmers fired as they advanced but they were rapidly running out of targets. The Crow were on the run.

These were the same men, most of them, that had hung Reno, but Sam didn't think about that. He was watching Clay Bassett race his roan to head off a fleeing Crow, saw the smoke and heard the crash of the gun, watching the warrior knocked from his horse.

And then it was over—the last few survivors of the young chief's band fleeing away up the gully, farmers and townsmen firing a hastening group of shots.

Clay rode up and dismounted, his high colored features

even more flushed. He pushed his hat back and tightened his cinch, not looking at Sam. Finally, he turned. "Had to get out to camp," he said gruffly. "Worried about Hannah an' all—" He stopped speaking and jerked off his hat and slammed it against his leg. "Shoot, what I want to say, Sam, is I want my job back. I—I don't like bein' sheriff."

The people were coming out with a dazed look on their faces. Down by Ketterman's Livery someone pistoled a warrior that still lived.

"I dunno," Sam said. "We do need a sheriff, Clay. We'll see."

"I didn't run out on anybody," Clay said doggedly. "I had to see Hannah was all right."

"She all right?"

Clay nodded. "Yep. We gonna get married, Sam."

"Good," Sam said. "Congratulations."

He rode through town, seeing with satisfaction that everyone was working to get things cleaned up. The farm women had been brought up and were busy taking care of the wounded, preparing a huge vat of soup, and making coffee. The farmers, town people, and the cattlemen were all working together. They were taking to one another in a warm and friendly way. It wouldn't last, Sam realized, but it was a start. They'd have to make adjustments but each had something to offer the other and that was what counted.

At the north edge of town he turned back, riding Charlie toward the hotel, suddenly thinking of Molly and wanting, with a strange yearning, to see her.

He was so deep in thought he didn't hear the voice until his name was repeated twice. He looked ahead to the hotel and saw Molly standing, looking in his direction. Another woman stood in a second floor window, looking out. It was Cherry. Then he swiveled his head and stared at the apparition in the alleyway, a carbine at his shoulder.

"Sam, I'm gonna kill you." Jesse Kenton spoke in a voice Sam had never heard before.

"My gun is empty," Sam said.

"Good. With your luck and mine I'd never stand a chance, Sam."

He drew the hammer back and Sam heard it click. He straightened in the saddle, waiting for the shock of the bullet. He heard a single shot and Kenton stiffened, looked at the sky with agonized eyes as he stumbled backward, trying to keep from falling. As he went down the rifle discharged skyward. Kenton didn't move after he struck the ground, the rifle still clutched in his hands.

Sam looked at the hotel window where he'd seen Cherry a moment before. She still stood there, holding a still-smoking rifle in her hand, standing motionless, staring. Dub Porter's face appeared behind Cherry. He took the rifle and waved his hand at Sam.

Sam slipped to the ground as Molly ran through the dust toward him. He came to meet her, seeing the eagerness in her eyes and then her outstretched arms went around his neck. He circled her waist with his arm, pulling her to him, kissing her hard on the mouth.

He raised his startled face to the sky as the first gentle drops of rain began falling. He took off his hat and walked Molly toward the hotel, his arm around her waist. He could feel the raindrops on his face and he could feel the warmth and love of the woman who walked beside him.

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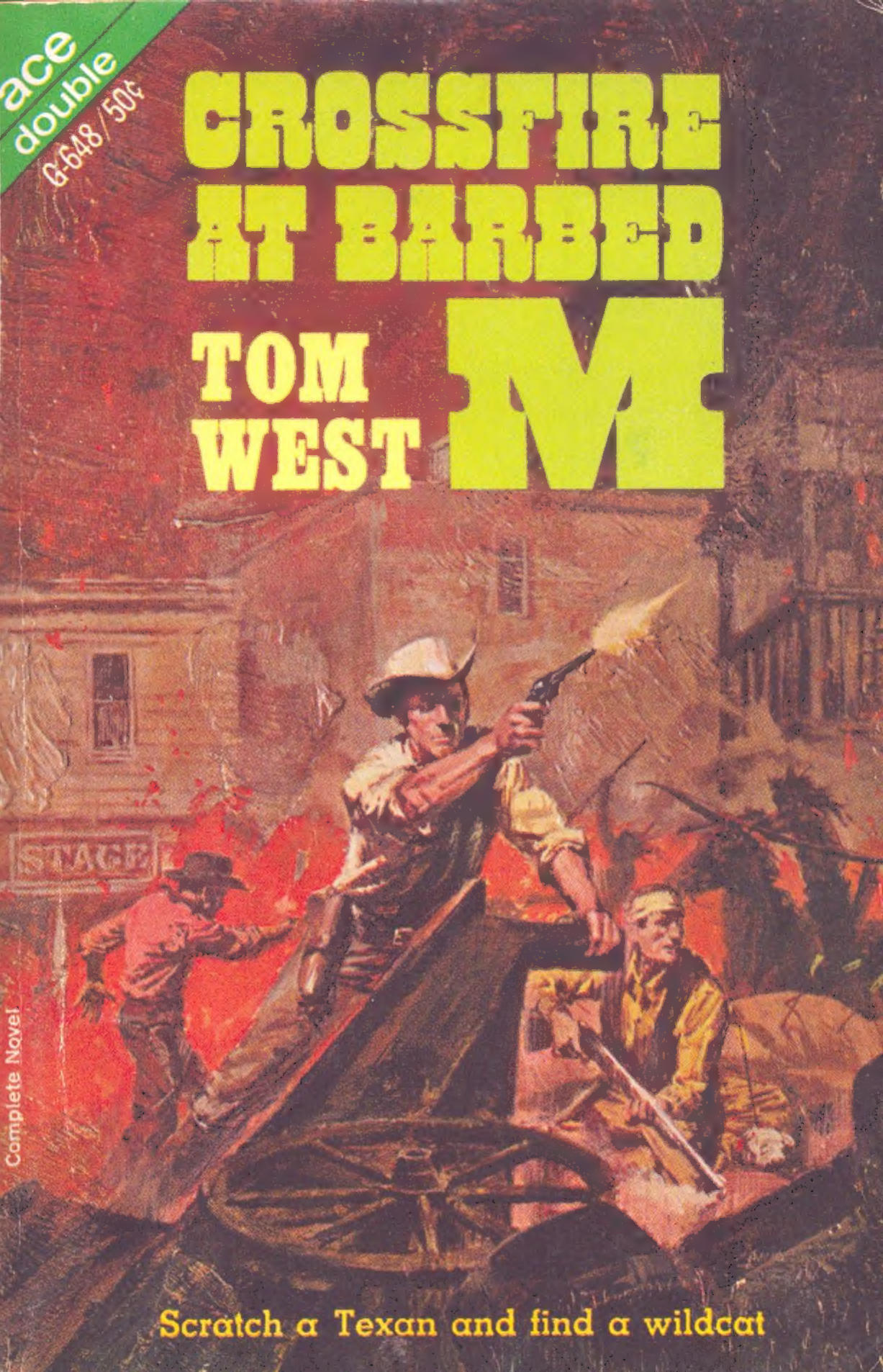

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